

The illustration depicts three characters in a dynamic, action-oriented pose. In the foreground, a man with brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a blue and white outfit with armor on his arms and legs, holds a long, glowing blue sword. Behind him to the left is a character with long, flowing purple hair and a wide, toothy grin, wearing a purple and blue outfit. To the right is a character with long, flowing blonde hair, wearing a white and yellow outfit. The background is a mix of blue and pinkish-purple hues, suggesting a battlefield or a dramatic setting.

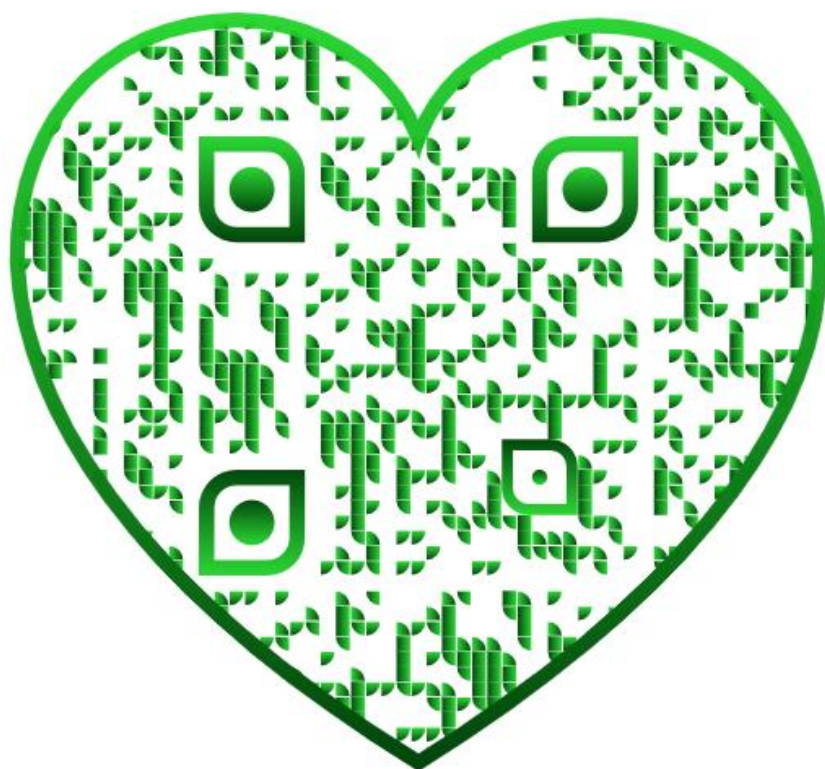
Kiraku Kishima

Illustrator
peroshi

2

Back to the Battlefield

The Veteran Heroes
Return to the Fray!





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"I'm Georgios
the Tyrant
Dragon of the
New Seven
Black Stars."

"That's a
shenmo,
then?"

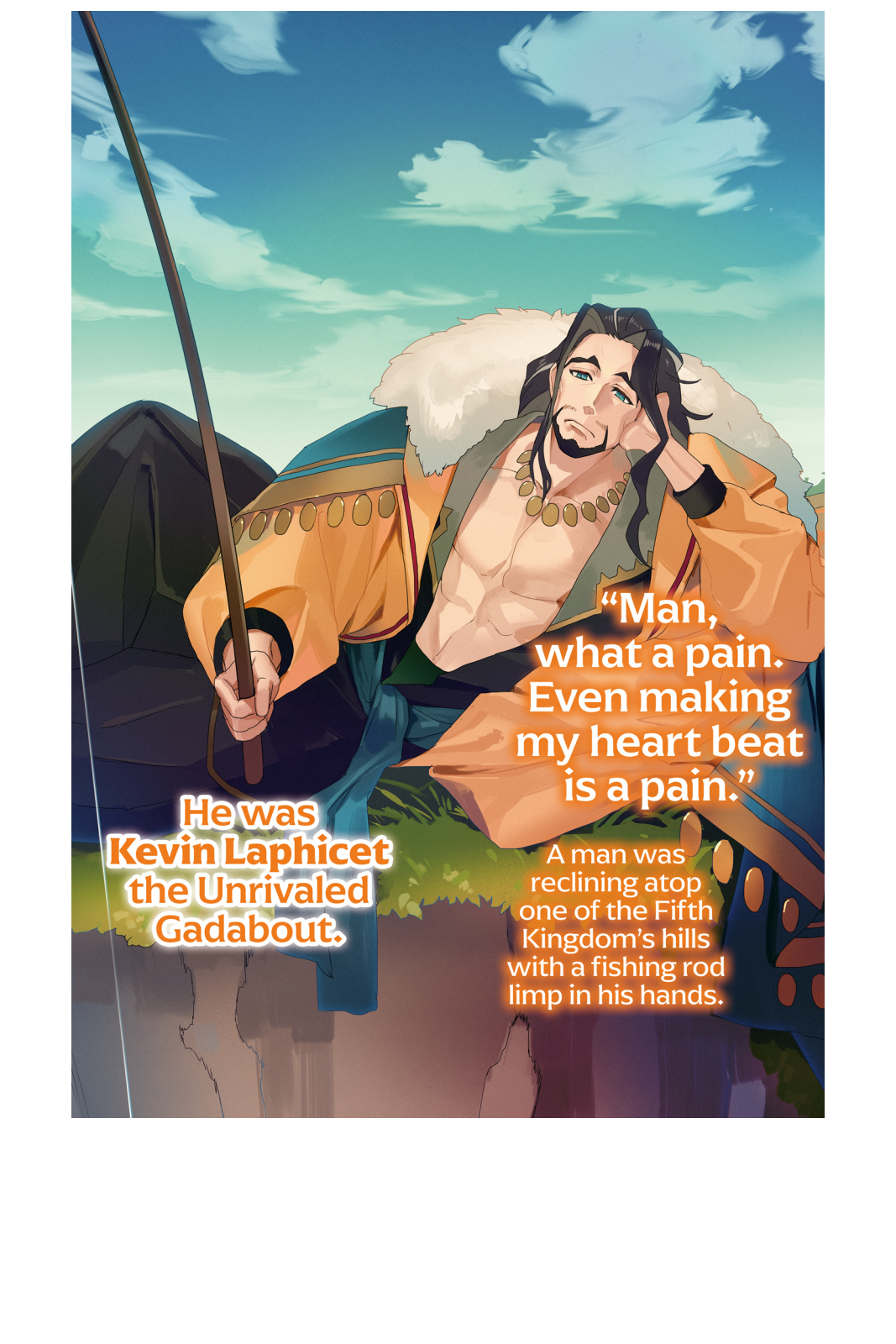
Back to the Battlefield

The Veteran Heroes
Return to the Fray! **2**



“Destroy
and plunder.
To enjoy
ourselves.”

A cloud of
sand that
could easily
be mistaken
for a desert
twister was
approaching,
with a night-
mare at its
center.

An illustration of a man with long dark hair and a beard, reclining on a grassy hill. He is wearing an orange robe with a fur collar and a necklace of gold coins. He holds a long fishing rod in his right hand. The background shows a blue sky with white clouds and a dark, rocky landscape.

He was
Kevin Laphicet
the Unrivalled
Gadabout.

“Man,
what a pain.
Even making
my heart beat
is a pain.”

A man was
reclining atop
one of the Fifth
Kingdom's hills
with a fishing rod
limp in his hands.

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The power to plunder or the power to protect. Which will prove stronger in the end?

Prologue

In a different dimension than the human world lay the underworld, a place governed by death and destruction, teeming with ferocious monsters. Alongside those beasts were the demons, a race of humanoid creatures with the traits of monsters. While both were inhabited by intelligent creatures—humans in the human world, demons in the underworld—there was one significant difference between them: the existence of law and order.

Unlike the human world, the underworld was lawless. Life was a fierce struggle for survival, and the strongest could govern entire regions with their power and charisma. Since might made right in that world, it was impossible to complain if someone stronger came along and usurped the local overlord. It was the definition of survival of the fittest. Thanks to that, the average demon who lasted in such a world had much higher mana and vitality than a human.

So it was that the demons powerful enough to rule at the summit of the underworld gathered in the same place: the reception hall of the demon lord's castle. It was a dim room that played on the primordial fear of the dark, its walls constructed from inorganic, bone-white stone that radiated a feeling of inhumanity. But the demons gathered here were pure monstrosities themselves, the strongest among the newly formed demon army, the New Seven Black Stars. As shenmo, the most formidable of the demon classes, they were indifferent to such fear.

Demon Lord Beelzebub sat at one end of a rectangular table, with the other six shenmo seated evenly to either side as they listened to him.

“Our enemies are seven, as are we.” Beelzebub's dignified voice rang across the room. “However, we have the Character Gate on our side. We could attack the same location with all seven of us, but—”

“That's bullshit!” said the dragon shenmo, a handsome yet ferocious man over 190 centimeters tall. He wore his arrogance on his sleeve as he leaned back in his chair with his feet on the table, right in front of the demon lord. He was Georgios the Tyrant Dragon, a violent demon who'd only minutes ago slaughtered four of the former Seven Black Stars just to kill some time.

“Ain't got no need for such cheap tricks.”

He showed blatant disrespect toward the demon lord, but

Beelzebub didn't so much as reproach him. Though Beelzebub was the leader of the New Seven Black Stars, they were equals as shenmo. The fact that there were six individuals on the same level as the demon lord was nothing short of a nightmare scenario for humanity.

"I don't care if they're the Seven Heroes or Seven Zeroes! Everyone else is trash," Georgios declared without hesitation.

"Now, one moment, Tyrant Dragon. Am I also included in that trash?" asked a blue-haired young boy. He had round puppy dog eyes, yet he showed no signs of fear sitting in a room oozing with powerful mana and malice. Undoubtedly, this boy, too, was a high-class shenmo and one of the New Seven Black Stars.

"Want me to prove it right here and now, Atlantis?"

"Sounds like fun. I've been wanting *something* of yours for quite a while."

Their mana surged like angry hurricane clouds, causing a creaking sound to reverberate throughout the room.

"Calm down, you two," Beelzebub said, keeping them in line.

"Hmph."

"Got it."

Georgios and Atlantis reined in their mana at Beelzebub's words.

"Anyway, I agree that we don't need to use underhanded methods."

No one objected to the demon lord's statement, just as they hadn't when Georgios had first said it. They all brimmed with confidence in their overwhelming combat strength, which they had used to come out on top in that hell of an underworld. A king has no need for tricks; they merely need to demonstrate their strength magnificently when the time comes.

"Very good. I'd expect nothing less of my handpicked elite. We will each attack one of the seven great human kingdoms," Beelzebub said.

"No objections here," said a young man who wore a butler's outfit and a slight grin.

"I'm also fine with that," said Atlantis.

A girl dressed in white from head to toe quietly nodded.

"*This is shaping up to be a rather enjoyable event.*" Those words weren't so much spoken as resonated across the room. They emanated from a skeletal man in robes whose head was composed of animal bones.

"I'm also in agreement," a blond man, his white suit adorned with many mechanical parts, cheerfully chimed in. "In fact, I could ask for nothing more."

"Hah, I actually want the seven of them to come at me all at once," the final member, Georgios, said brashly. He was the only one

to admit it, but the rest of the New Seven Black Stars shared the sentiment. To them, defeat was unthinkable.

“I have one last word of warning. Take it as advice from someone who’s fought the humans before,” Beelzebub said. “While it’s true that we far surpass humans in terms of raw strength, don’t underestimate their latent power. Crush them with your full strength and without a shred of mercy.”

“Is that some kind of introspection from the great demon lord who blundered and lost to humanity last time?” Georgios jeered.

Despite the provocation, Beelzebub replied in his usual calm manner. “If you’d like, you may think of it that way.”

“Wow, what a wimp.” Georgios stood up from his chair. “Their latent powers or whatever crap don’t matter to me. I’m the strongest, and everyone else is trash,” he said before turning to leave the room.

Beelzebub quietly watched him leave.

“Hmm. It’s advantageous that the New Seven Black Stars are significantly stronger than the last team, but the same is true for their egos. I finally understand the stress Alan feels.”

In the end, the name of his old enemy escaped his lips.

Chapter 1: The Unrivaled Gadabout

1

“It’s nice that this kingdom is as tranquil as usual.”

It was a week after the former Seven Black Stars’ attack, and Alan Granger was walking around the Fifth Kingdom, Green Farm—the Kingdom of Nature and Agriculture. A great deal of stress had piled on his shoulders from working all day holed up in a knight’s office, but he could feel it fall away as he walked through the pleasant scenery, with olive gardens stretching as far as the eye could see.

“It makes you want to live out your retirement here, doesn’t it?” Alan’s attendant, Rosetta, was also with him, in her usual maid outfit. The people walking down the road kept turning to look at her, probably because her beautiful face and well-proportioned figure caught their attention. A young noble in fancy clothes, accompanied by his own attendant, glanced her way as they passed each other.

“You’re as popular as ever, Rosetta. I’m proud to be your employer,” Alan said.

“It’s all thanks to you providing me with enough time and money to tend to my appearance, Master Alan.”

“Well, you *are* a girl who’s come of age, after all.”

Rosetta started her attendant duties a little later than general-errand maids, because Alan knew she was a marriageable age. Thanks to his consideration, she could take her time primping every morning.

“Still, don’t you know any nice young men? It’s about time to choose your partner, isn’t it?”

There was no need for her to rush, but it was a fact that finding a partner would be easier while she was young. As long as she didn’t pick a strict husband who confined her to their home, she would have her usual freedom even after marriage.

“I’ll think about it if I find a man better than you, Master Alan,” Rosetta replied.

“Look here...”



Alan had a sense of how Rosetta felt toward him. It was likely she thought of him as special, given that he had saved her life long ago. He also knew her feelings weren't fleeting, since he suspected she'd felt the same way for about ten years.

She should make her decision after learning a few more things about the world.

If Rosetta met more people and saw different ways of life, she might find better alternatives.

"No, I'm just making excuses," Alan muttered.

"Did you say something?" Rosetta asked. Her eyes were on his face.

"It's nothing."

In the world of nobles, a marriage with an age gap like his and Rosetta's wasn't uncommon. For all the good it had done him, Alan had been granted a noble title thanks to his accomplishments in the last war. There would be nothing strange about any of this.

Maybe I'm the one who can't get his feelings in order.

It was a story of twenty-five years ago, but some attachments weren't so easy to forget.

"Oh, there it is!"

Rosetta pointed at a fortress surrounded by water further ahead. It was the Fifth Kingdom's royal palace, home to the king, the last member of the Seven Heroes. He was the fellow who had artfully dodged the imperial summons to the last meeting, and the only hero who was yet to agree to cooperate on their united front against the demons.

"I never asked, how much do you know about him, Rosetta?"

"I looked him up, and he is an impressive man. Kevin Laphicet, the Unrivaled Gadabout. He ranks second for the most demons defeated in the history of the hundred-year war. He's also the only other hero who defeated one of the few shenmo in the original Seven Black Stars—just like you, Master Alan. I believe his contributions in the previous war are more than enough to earn him the title of great hero." Rosetta recited a smooth explanation of Kevin's brilliant war record.

"Yeah, that's all true. He always fought relentlessly whenever he went to the battlefield."

"It's his Unique Skill that put the 'unrivaled' in his title, isn't it? I read that Save and Load was incredibly powerful."

More than just incredible, it was an invincible skill. As the name implied, Kevin's ability could reload time. With it, he could return to the point right before he was defeated and repeat a fight countless times until he emerged victorious.

“It’s not just his ability that’s powerful. He’s also number one in combat skill among the Seven Heroes,” Alan said.

“Even better than you, Master Alan?!”

Rosetta was astonished. Alan boasted unparalleled combat skill that let him go toe to toe with the Seven Black Stars, even though his physical abilities were those of an average soldier. How could Kevin be more skilled than that? Of course, skill was not the only thing that mattered in combat, so that didn’t necessarily mean he was stronger than Alan when it came to actual combat. Regardless, it was certainly clear to Rosetta that he must be a remarkable fighter.

She gulped. “I’m about to meet an incredible person, aren’t I?”

“Well, that’s true, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up if I were you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Man, what a pain. Even making my heart beat is a pain.”

At the same time Rosetta and Alan were walking, a man was reclining atop a hill with a fishing rod limp in his hands. Lazing about in broad daylight and fishing in a place like this would typically be expected of a recluse or retiree, but the clothing he was wearing was luxurious and well-tailored. In fact, he wore the traditional outfit of the Fifth Kingdom’s king.

Kevin Laphicet, forty-three years old. Gray strands marked his crudely groomed beard and long crown of hair. From the way his expensive clothes haphazardly fell on him to the way he slouched and slumped, lethargy and sloppiness oozed out of him like slime off a slug.

“Man, I really want to hurry up and reach where you are.”

He had yet to catch a single fish for the day.

Alan and Rosetta continued along a road to the palace and soon arrived at its gates, where a man in a tailcoat was standing next to the gatekeepers.

“We appreciate you making the long journey here, Sir Alan Granger the Champion.”

“I should be thanking you for coming to greet me, Minister. I appreciate you standing in during the recent meeting.”

The man who came to greet them was the Fifth Kingdom’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. One week ago, he had participated in the meeting for countermeasures against the demon army as Kevin’s representative.

“I’ll get straight to the point. I need to talk to Kevin. Is he in the

castle right now?"

The Fifth Kingdom was a peaceful and serene place with a four-day work week. However, Alan had come on a weekday. Under normal circumstances, the king should have been in the castle, busy with official business.

The minister grimaced. "Well, no..."

"I knew it." Alan sighed.

"He's been gone since morning. I am truly sorry for the trouble our idiot is causing you."

"I know who we're talking about, so I can't say I'm surprised."

Being called an idiot by his minister despite being the king was a testament to Kevin's work ethic.

"Hey, you lot," the Minister of Foreign Affairs said to the gatekeepers, a vein creasing his temple, "did you see that idiot leave?"

"That idiot? Hmm, did you see him?" one gatekeeper asked another.

"Oh, yeah, that idiot left early in the morning with his fishing rod in hand."

"You moron! Why didn't you stop him?!" the minister cried.

"I'm so sorry!" The gatekeeper meekly lowered his head.

"Excuse me, but do even common guards call Master Kevin an idiot? He is one of the Seven Heroes and the king of this kingdom, right?" Rosetta asked, bewildered.

"Well, he's very close to his people, for better or worse. Mostly for worse," Alan said.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs bowed deeply to Alan. "I am terribly sorry. We'll find him right away and drag him before you, so please give us a moment to—"

"No, don't trouble yourselves." Alan held up a hand in refusal. "I'm tired from the journey, so I can have the audience tomorrow. More importantly, could we leave our luggage with you? I haven't visited the Fifth Kingdom in a while, so I'd like to take a casual stroll today."

After Alan and Rosetta unloaded their luggage in the palace guest room, they left together. Their goal wasn't idle amusement but to meet with the Gadabout. The official audience was tomorrow, but Alan and Kevin were old friends. What was the harm in them meeting for a chat?

"But do you actually know where he is?" Rosetta asked.

"I have a hunch where he'd want to go at a time like this."

Alan headed away from town, to a hill with a good view of the sunset. As they approached the cliff, the silhouette of a man idling

about while dangling a fishing line was visible against the fading light.

“There he is.”

“*That’s* Master Kevin of the Seven Heroes?” Rosetta eyed the man with a hint of suspicion.

Kevin let out a long yawn. “Ugh, even breathing is such a pain,” he mumbled in a lifeless voice.

The unmotivated energy dripping from every pore in his body made Rosetta’s face twitch. She couldn’t think of a thing to say.

“See? I told you not to get your hopes up.” Alan walked up to Kevin while enjoying the pleasant sea breeze on his skin. “So, here you are, Kevin.”

Kevin Laphicet, one of the Seven Heroes and king of the Fifth Kingdom, didn’t take his eyes away from the ocean.

“Hey. It’s been a while, Alan.” His voice was as listless as before.



“Any bites yet?” Alan asked.

“Nope, none at all.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“No, it’s pretty much perfect this way.”

“Really?” Alan wasn’t into fishing so he couldn’t say, but weren’t people who fished happier when they actually caught some fish?

“It’s better when I don’t have to pull the fish in.”

“Then why are you even fishing?” Alan questioned.

“Why? Well, I’m just killing time until I die,” Kevin said immediately, without a thought for how it sounded. “Living itself is hard, so I want to head to the afterlife as soon as possible, but the doctors say I’m in stupidly good health, so I have years ahead of me. Fishing without catching anything is the perfect pastime for me.”

“I see.” Alan didn’t criticize Kevin. Everyone was free to live their life as they wanted. However, their current situation was urgent; Kevin’s cooperation was imperative. “Hey, you’ve heard about the demon army’s return, right?”

“Yeah,” Kevin groaned.

“They’ve become even more powerful and are attacking humanity again. Lend us your strength, Unrivaled Gadabout.”

“What? Don’t wanna. Sounds like a pain.” Kevin shot down Alan’s heartfelt request with a sniper’s precision and speed.

“You never change, do you?” Alan said wryly.

Well, I did expect it to turn out like this, he thought.

“Man, looks like the sun is setting. Gotta return to the castle. Bet the Minister of Foreign Affairs is angry. What a pain,” Kevin grumbled before starting to gather his fishing tackle.

Alan and Kevin returned to the castle together after Kevin’s “fishing” was done.

As Kevin walked through the town, townspeople gathered around him.

“Oh, Mister Kevin. How did it go?” a townspeople asked him.

“Terribly. I admit defeat.”

“But why, Lord Idiot? What, did you catch no fish at all again? Here, have a present.”

“And I baked too many pies,” said another. “Have one if you’d like, Mister Kevin.”

“Thanks a lot.”

Rosetta was amazed to see the townsfolk giving various things to him.

“Master Kevin seems to be on great terms with his people,”

Rosetta said as she and Alan watched Kevin from a short distance away.

“He’s always been strangely approachable, but I don’t think it’s right for the king to be this close to his subjects,” Alan said.

As the man standing at the top of the kingdom, a certain amount of dignity was important; at least, that was what Alan thought. Kevin wasn’t acting like a proper king. Alan had heard that the ministers were fully in charge of all official business, so it was more than just Kevin’s image that was lacking. He suspected it was only possible thanks to the Fifth Kingdom’s tranquil climate and inhabitants.

“At any rate, is Master Kevin really one of the Seven Heroes?” Rosetta asked.

Alan countered with a question of his own: “What makes you doubt him?”

“The others I saw during the meeting, like Mistress Dora or Master Derek, felt more, how do I put it?” Rosetta paused and considered. “Ambitious, I suppose. As far as the official records go, he fought as much as you did, so how can he be so lackadaisical?”

“You’re not wrong, and he usually *is* like this now,” Alan said. After observing Kevin’s lazy behavior, it was natural for Rosetta to doubt whether he could be one of the heroes who defeated the Seven Black Stars and put an end to the Titanomachy.

Alan sighed. “The thing is, there are some unfortunate circumstances that have led to his current state.”

“What kind of circumstances?”

He didn’t have time to answer Rosetta. The group had left town and headed toward a street that led to the palace where foot traffic was thin. Suddenly, Alan sensed ill intent in the air.

“Stand back, Rosetta.”

“Huh?”

Three armed men stepped out of a tree’s shadow and blocked the path Kevin and the others were about to walk down.

“Oh? Who are you?” Kevin asked the men.

“Really, man? You don’t know *us*? You live under a rock or somethin’?” said a mustached man in a bandana. He looked like their leader. “We’re the pirate group active all across the seven great kingdoms, Silver Fang!”

The three men struck a bizarre group pose.

“You know these guys, Alan?” Kevin turned around and asked.

“Sure, more or less. They’re a fairly notable pirate organization.” Despite being stationed on the frontier, as a knight commander, Alan was up to date on large criminal organizations. Silver Fang operated by attacking ships around every kingdom’s sea routes, then pillaging their goods or demanding ransom.

“Still, isn’t it an exaggeration to claim you’re active across all seven great kingdoms? The Second Kingdom isn’t surrounded by the sea at all, so it’s impervious to pirate attacks,” Alan pointed out.

“Shaddup!” the leader shouted, spit flying out of his mouth. “We’ll get to it in the future!”

“So, do you have some business with me?” Kevin’s voice was light, especially in comparison to the aggression the pirate was putting into the conversation. “You can ask that church if you need directions.”

“How the hell did you decide that’s what we need?! You think we’re some kind of joke?!” the pirate yelled. It made one wonder if his throat ever got tired. He pointed his club at Kevin. “How ’bout you hand over your royal-looking, fancy-pants clothes, you clown?”

Even though Kevin’s clothes were a mess because of his lack of care, they were still valuable and well-tailored. The pirates might have approached them in a direct and hasty manner, but it seemed they had an eye for quality—although that apparently only extended to objects, not people.

“Well, here’s the thing. They’re not just royal-*looking*. These are the king’s traditional clothes.” Kevin had a dopey expression on his face as he revealed this. “They’re so easily identifiable, I doubt you’ll be able to pawn them off anywhere.”

“What?!” the three pirates exclaimed in unison. They had no idea who Kevin was, so they had to be outsiders. Any local would have recognized Kevin’s face.

“B-Bro, could he be...the actual king?!”

“What, this shiftless guy?! What kind of kingdom is this?!”

“Wow, that’s really rude,” Kevin said, his voice relaxed despite his words.

“Wait, doesn’t that mean...he’s one of the Seven Heroes?!” one of the leader’s underlings said.

The pirates gulped. The Seven Heroes had quite the reputation among outlaws like them. During the great war, honest citizens had fought and died against the demon army, but many hadn’t cared about the future of humanity and had pillaged from their fellow humans. Ironically, since they’d never fought against the demons, many of them survived the war. Now, those survivors were higher-ups in criminal organizations. They told tales to their underlings about the fierceness of the war, the terror of the demon army, and the strength of the Seven Heroes who put an end to it all.

“What do we do, bro? We could always retreat.”

“No, don’t be afraid. Sure, the Seven Heroes were strong in their youth, but that was twenty-five years ago. They must be nothing but withered husks by now.”

The underlings stared at Kevin, who was yawning like a dog after

a good meal.

“Man, I’m so bored. And my butt is itchy,” he said. Then, he actually scratched it.

“Yeah, we can take him!”

“Right! He looks so decrepit!”

“Told you so! Don’t take those stories the old men above us say too seriously.”

The pirates seemed to have agreed on a course of action, as they surrounded Kevin with weapons in hand.

“Master Alan? Master Kevin is completely surrounded,” Rosetta said.

“This is what happens when you don’t show a shred of initiative. It’s a real problem,” Alan said. Deterrence was important. If someone projected strength, few people would pick a fight with them, whether they were truly strong or not.

“Aren’t you going to help him?”

“No, there’s no need.” Alan thought back to the sight of Kevin fighting twenty-five years ago. “Watch closely, Rosetta. You’ll see how the Unrivaled Gadabout really fights.”

Rosetta opened her eyes wide. Would she witness the true strength of the man who’d once defeated a shenmo, just like Alan had?

Kevin took a deep breath, then directed a sharp glare at the pirates.

“Come on, boys.”

His spirit exuded such pressure the pirates almost instinctively stepped back, but their pride won in the end.

“Don’t look down on uuuuus!”

The three of them charged Kevin in the same breath.

Kevin, for his part, left himself completely open to their attacks.

“Agh!” He took a direct hit to the side from the leader’s club and flew into the air before collapsing with a doughy thud.

“Wha?” Rosetta reflexively gasped in a childish voice. She and the pirates stared in confused silence.

“Ourgh,” Kevin moaned, showing no signs of rising.

“H-Hell yeeeeaaaah! I beat one of the freaking Seven Heroes!” the pirate leader roared.

“What? He’s so weak! The Unrivaled Gadabout is far from unrivaled, Master Alan!” Rosetta shrieked.

“That damn slacker,” Alan said with his biggest sigh of the day.

Needless to say, Kevin had taken a hit from the pirate leader on purpose. The leader was the only pirate wielding a weapon without a blade, so it wasn’t difficult for Kevin to evade the worst of the attack. For added drama, all he had to do was pretend to get blown away and

lie on the ground.

And why would he do this?

“I’m done for. I leave the rest to you, Alan.”

Kevin’s goal was to fob the pirate problem off on Alan. Defeating them himself sounded like work.

“Honestly. Don’t use your refined control over your body for such a stupid thing,” Alan said.

Kevin could probably defeat the pirates in less than a second if he put his mind to it. Instead, the act he’d put on was so convincing that the pirates believed they’d taken him down.

“Bwa ha ha ha! My name will be known far and wide. Call me Hero Slayer Betts from now on!”

“That was awesome!”

“Lookin’ good, Hero Slayer!”

“Ha ha ha ha! Nice, keep it coming! Now then.” The pirate leader, Betts, turned to Alan and Rosetta. “You two, fork over everything you have on you. The girl will fetch a pretty penny if we sell her off to a brothel. Just look how hot she is.”

Alan stepped in front of Rosetta. “No, that won’t be happening.”

“Oh? You’re gonna stand against the great Hero Slayer Betts?” Betts had taken quite a liking to the nickname he’d given himself.

“A word of warning before we fight. My name is Alan Granger, one of the Seven Heroes, just like him.” Alan named himself just in case it would have an effect. The ideal outcome would be for the pirates to flinch and run.

“Hah! So what? I’m the Hero Slayer, baby!”

“As you wish. I’ll have to make this a painful lesson.”

“That’s our line!”

The three men lunged at Alan all at once.

It was over in no time.

“Dammit, we’ll remember thiiiiis!”

The pirates stumbled away, their faces bruised and swollen.

“Don’t worry, I know you will. I’ll have the knights of this kingdom arrest you later.” Alan had fought empty-handed, but they still didn’t stand a chance.

“You’re a lifesaver, Alan.” As soon as the pirates were gone, Kevin popped up like nothing had happened.

“You’re such a...” Alan trailed off with another long sigh.

That night, Alan was in the guest room of the Fifth Kingdom’s royal palace, tending to his sword—the very sword he’d received from Empress Margaret. It had been crafted with a magical technique that

made it easier for him to pour his mana through it, but without periodic maintenance, the conductivity would drop.

He drew the sword and placed it on the table, then picked up the scabbard. He pulled its tip off to reveal a magicite meant for the upkeep of magic swords inside it. With a steady hand, he used the magicite to sharpen the blade. It was challenging to do an even job without using too much or too little strength, but Alan was accustomed to the work.

"I haven't done this in over twenty years, but my body remembers." He used to do this every day when he was young; muscle memory wasn't so easy to forget.

"I did such a poor job when you first taught me that you scolded me," he murmured.

There was a knock on the door, followed by Rosetta's sweet yet firm voice. "Master Alan, I have come to inform you about tomorrow's plans."

"Come in."

Rosetta opened the door courteously and entered the room. She quickly glanced at Alan, then lowered her head slightly. She was usually more casual, but she seemed to be in work mode.

"I apologize for interrupting your sword maintenance."

"Pay it no mind. So, tomorrow's plans?"

Rosetta raised her head and began her report. "The official audience with the king will be held at twelve o'clock. After that, the Secretary of Military Affairs said he certainly wanted to meet with you, so he invited you to dinner at five o'clock. Will you attend?"

"The Secretary of Military Affairs would be... Ah, yes, Rand. I owe a lot to him for his help during the great war, and it's been some time since I've seen him. Sure, I'd like to talk to him too."

"Very well, I will pass your response on."

"Hmm? What's wrong, Rosetta?"

After Rosetta finished reviewing Alan's schedule, she stood in place silently. When she was working, she usually moved on to the next topic so fast you'd think she was in love with it.

"Um, can I ask you something, Master Alan?" She had returned to her casual tone, likely because she wanted to discuss something personal.

"You can ask me anything. I have nothing to hide from you, besides official confidential business."

"Is that so?" Rosetta let out a breath and relaxed. "This is about Master Kevin. Is his war record really true? Were his accomplishments perhaps swapped with someone else's?"

"Oh, that's what this is about." Observing Kevin in his current state, it was impossible to imagine him proactively heading to the

battlefield and tirelessly fighting the demon army. “It’s true. I can guarantee it myself, as we fought on the same battlefield countless times. He used to be a real workaholic; no one’s fought the demon army more than him. But now...he’s lost his reason for giving his all.”

“His reason?”

At around the same time, Kevin was sitting at his desk in the king’s office in the royal palace, despite the late time of day. Rather, he was being *forced* to sit there.

“Hey, working this late into the night is bad for the body,” Kevin said.

“And whose fault is that, you idiot?”

The minute Kevin returned to the castle, the Minister of Foreign Affairs—vein pulsing in his temple—had dragged him to his office and locked him in. There, Kevin was forced to stamp document after document from the large stack that had piled up.

“I’ve told you, you’re all free to stamp these using your own judgment.”

“That will simply not do. We don’t exactly like leaving work to a fool like you either, so we deal with as much work in our capacity as ministers as possible, but these need the king’s approval—no one else’s.”

“But that’s *such* a pain,” Kevin grumbled limply.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs heaved a long sigh. “Don’t you ever think about taking a page out of the late Queen Reece’s book and putting in some effort for your homeland as its king, idiot?”

“No, I don’t,” Kevin snapped. The vein in the minister’s temple popped up once more.

“Reece worked hard for this kingdom and died soon after,” Kevin said, paying the minister’s irritation no mind.

“Well...”

Kevin still remembered clearly. More than twenty years later, when he closed his eyes, his memories with Reece rose up as vivid as reflections in a still pool.

When Kevin Laphicet—Kevin Clifford at the time—was young, he fooled around to his heart’s content, true to his Unrivaled Gadabout moniker.

“Boy, was I lucky to be born a noble’s third son!”

In the Fifth Kingdom, the third son of a noble family didn’t inherit the position of head of the family, so the money he received from his

family provided the perfect opportunity for him to live an indulgent lifestyle. Kevin took full advantage of this privilege and lived a life of debauchery where he got up at noon, idled about until the sun started to set, then spent his time playing around in bars and casinos all night.

However, one day, after Kevin turned sixteen, his older brother forcefully dragged him to a party in the royal castle where he had a fateful encounter with the first princess of the Fifth Kingdom. Reece Laphicet's beauty was known across every kingdom, but it was the sorrow hidden in her eyes that grabbed Kevin's heart. He thought—based on no evidence whatsoever—that he would be the one to make her smile!

“It was love at first sight. I will protect you till death do us part. Marry me.”

“Huh?”

After his sudden appearance, coupled with such a declaration, Kevin was pummeled by the princess's bodyguards. However, quite unexpectedly, he left a good impression on Reece, so they promised to meet alone in the future.

“Kevin, I want to end the war and bring peace to this kingdom,” Reece said.

Despite her royal status, she fought on the front lines against the demon army. Her body wasn't the sturdiest by nature, but she had enormous mana reserves and an aptitude for three elements. As royalty, as a person who wished for peace, and as someone who had been granted the magic to fight from the heavens, she wished only to eliminate the demon army and bring tranquility to the Fifth Kingdom. She was truly a gentle soul.

“Then you can count on me! Add me to your unit!” Kevin spouted. There were no demon attacks in Kevin's area, so he cared very little about bringing peace to the kingdom, but he wanted Reece's attention.

“Heh heh, you're a funny guy.” She was embarrassed, but she chuckled a bit. “Very well, Kevin. Let's restore peace to the people and this kingdom, together.”

“And so, Kevin went to the same battlefield as Reece.”

“He sounds very passionate.” Rosetta was surprised by Alan's retelling of Kevin's youth.

“He's an irresponsible man at heart. But it's his lack of responsibility that lets him throw himself into something without a care in the world. Apparently, he was a burden at first, since he was just an amateur who'd been living a leisurely life before that.”

“That's only natural.”

“But he wanted to get in Reece’s good books, so he kept fighting on the front lines like a man possessed. During those fights, he awakened his ability, Save and Load. The rest is as you know it.”

Kevin’s frenzied efforts led to him repelling demon after demon, until he valiantly defeated one of the Seven Black Stars and fulfilled Reece’s dream.

Alan continued. “The love between Kevin and Reece blossomed after they fought so many battles side by side. They married soon after the war was over. A young man who’d lived in self-indulgence made his love come true and became a hero.”

“His life sounds like a fairy tale,” Rosetta said. And she was right. It was a heroic tale—almost too good to be true.

“The two of them didn’t live happily ever after in the epilogue.”

“What do you mean?”

“Reece passed away a year after the war was over. She was frail by nature, but kept on fighting, so her body eventually broke down from overwork.”

Rosetta gulped.

“She could only spend a single year in the peaceful world she’d finally grasped,” Alan said. “The psychological shock to Kevin was great, to say the least. I attended the funeral as well. He was completely silent, shedding not a single tear, just staring at her lifeless body.”

Alan could still recall what Kevin had muttered at the time.

“What was all of Reece’s hard work even for?”

His beloved worked harder than anyone to obtain a peaceful world, yet she could spend less than a year in it before departing. Kevin, who had endeavored for her sake, had lost his reason to do anything.

“That should do it.” Alan sheathed his sword after finishing its maintenance. It thudded quietly as he placed it on the table. “I can’t say I don’t understand how Kevin feels.”

“Master Alan...” Rosetta opened her mouth as if to say something, but gave up halfway and closed it again, then changed the subject. “From what you’ve told me, Master Kevin’s problem is a deep-rooted one. How would you convince him to cooperate?”

“Well, I feel like things will work out one way or another,” Alan said in a lighthearted tone.

Rosetta’s eyes widened. “That doesn’t sound too likely to me.”

“Relax, it’ll be fine. He’ll join the war even if we leave him to his own devices. I’m only here to make a request for his direct cooperation; nothing more, nothing less.”

Rosetta blinked at Alan in confusion as she wondered where exactly his confidence came from.

Chapter 2: The Unrivaled Gadabout

2

The next day, Rosetta went to the city early in the morning. Many shops were already open on the main street. She entered a store famous for its blueberry pie.

“Welcome! How may I—Oh?” The shopkeeper, a woman with the broad physique of a laborer, realized something when she looked at Rosetta’s face. “You were with Mister Kevin yesterday, right?”

“Yes. Master Kevin let me have a slice of the pie yesterday. It was delicious, so I’d like to try it again.” That wasn’t the only reason. Alan was also quite fond of the pie, so she wanted to try recreating the taste herself once they were back, but perhaps that part was best left unsaid.

“Oh, really?” The shopkeeper looked Rosetta up and down with a knowing smile. “Well, I won’t teach you the recipe, but I’m not against you eating it, of course. Have as much as you’d like.”

“Thank you very much,” Rosetta said.

The shopkeeper wrapped some pie up for Rosetta. In the meantime, she poked around the store. There was a small crowd of customers inside despite the early hour.

“There are a lot of people in here,” Rosetta mumbled to herself.

The shopkeeper, perhaps hearing Rosetta, said, “There weren’t that many people outside, right, love?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, it’s as you say.”

Pedestrian traffic was quite low considering the size of the city and the number of stores lined up in the street. Normally, many people would fill the streets as they visited the stores early in the morning to buy the freshest seafood caught before sunrise that same day.

“After news of the new demon army invasion came out, law and order has gotten a little worse. People don’t want to walk around as much,” the shopkeeper explained.

“Oh, I see.”

The scary thing about war wasn’t just the external invaders. The greatest danger for those living in places that didn’t become battlefields was internal: the criminals that took advantage of the disorder to commit crimes.

“Either way, our Kevin is bound to do something about them

again,” the shopkeeper said cheerfully.

“You really trust Master Kevin, don’t you?” Rosetta asked in surprise. Some of her surprise stemmed from the shopkeeper’s cheerful attitude in face of the upcoming war, but most of it was from the faith she put in Kevin.

“Without a doubt! He’s usually as limp as a soggy-bottomed pie, but our king gets the job done when push comes to shove. That’s what he did twenty-five years ago.”

The shopkeeper was in her late forties. While she had been young during the previous war, she was one of the people who’d experienced it and lived to tell the tale. The center of the Fifth Kingdom was one of the places with the fewest casualties in the Titanomachy. The reason was, of course, thanks to the efforts of Princess Reece and Hero Kevin. The people of this kingdom remembered that very well.

“Here’s your blueberry pie. You’re not going to eat it here, right?” The shopkeeper handed the carefully wrapped pie over to Rosetta.

“No, thank you.”

Rosetta was about to accept the pie when the door slammed open. Three terribly familiar men rushed into the store—the pirates from the day before. They pointed their weapons at the nearby customers’ throats and shouted, “Nobody move! Do exactly what we tell you if you want to get out of this alive!”

Meanwhile, Alan was in the graveyard where generations of the royalty of Green Farm had been buried, at the outskirts of the castle. There was a particular white cross erected on its premises. A man stood there, in front of the grave with the best view of the ocean. His luxurious royal outfit and tall stature made his identity obvious even from afar.

“Hey, Kevin. It must be hard for you to come here so early when you find everything such a pain.” Alan raised his hand to greet him, but Kevin replied without even turning around.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Kevin set a single yellow flower in front of the grave. Alan knew that despite Kevin saying that even breathing was too much effort, he never missed leaving a new flower here every day.

“What about you, Alan?”

“What about me?”

“Have you forgotten about her?”

“I’ve been visiting her grave less frequently.”

“I see. You’ve always looked forward, haven’t you?”



There was silence between them for a while.

"I'm sorry, but...I won't fight," Kevin said, breaking the silence. "I've expended enough effort for a lifetime. I did a good job for the prodigal son of a low-ranking noble, if I do say so myself."

"Hearing that from a man who died countless times in order to defeat a shenmo leaves me at a loss for words." Alan had lived in the same era as Kevin and had also experienced the loss of a loved one; he knew how Kevin felt. "Despite that, I think you'll join the battle."

"No, I just told you I won't. Stop it. Because many of the things you've said with that kind of confidence before have come true."

"You *will* join the battle," Alan said once again, as confident as ever. "You're someone who'll work hard for Reece's sake, no matter how far you need to go."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kevin asked, though he didn't turn away from Reece's grave.

"I apologize for interrupting your conversation!" a guard shouted while running up to Alan and Kevin. "I have something to report to you, Master Kevin."

"What is it? If it's a pain to deal with, I'll pretend I didn't hear it. If you've accepted that, go ahead," Kevin replied.

The guard's face scrunched in response to Kevin's brutal honesty, but he soon composed himself, straightened his back, and gave his report. "Criminals have locked themselves in Berry Bakery in the Ridemark sector and taken the shopkeeper and many customers hostage."

Kevin opened his eyes wide in response, and Alan could guess why. "Is that the shop of the woman who gave you pie yesterday?" he asked.

"It is," Kevin replied, his voice a step lower than before.

"We would typically inform Your Majesty of such an event through a document after it was resolved, but the culprits are the outsider pirates you reported yesterday."

"*Those* guys. They never learn, do they? So, what are their demands?" Alan asked the guard.

"They want a boat prepared in the nearby harbor within four hours so they can escape the kingdom."

They didn't have any government bigwigs held hostage, so their demand was reasonable. If this was the Sixth Kingdom, which had the highest regard for human rights, they could have made more extreme demands. In this kingdom, the lives of several commoners didn't hold as much value—at least they *shouldn't*. Yet the representative of Green Farm next to Alan wore a grim expression after hearing the news.

Kevin swung his royal cloak out behind himself and walked away.

“Master Kevin? Where are you going?!” the guard cried.

“I have some minor business to attend to.”

As he was leaving, Alan called out to him. “What’s wrong, Kevin? Can’t just ignore them?”

Kevin stopped in response to his words but said nothing.

“This will become a common occurrence from now on. The kingdom can’t remain peaceful once the fight with the demon army begins in earnest. I thought you decided to turn a blind eye to it, to abandon your people because you didn’t feel like putting in the effort.”

Kevin started walking again without answering. Alan had a small smile on his face as he watched him.

“I knew it. You’re someone who’ll work hard for Reece’s sake.”

“Ugh... You’re a real pain as usual,” Kevin said as he left the graveyard.

“And you’re just as tactless as usual,” Alan muttered in return as he watched Kevin walk out of sight.

“Maybe I should go deal with *that* now,” Alan said before heading in a different direction than Kevin.

The guard they left behind was puzzled at what Alan could have meant by that.

“Hey! How much longer?!”

“One more hour. Looks like they’re getting the boat ready for us, no problem.”

“Nice! I was worried how things would turn out when they put up wanted posters and chased us all around town, but my idea brought us back from the brink.”

“You’re the best, bro!”

“Ha ha ha, oh stop it. Keep the compliments coming.”

The armed pirates who had taken hostages in Berry Bakery were talking merrily amongst themselves.

Things have turned rather complicated. I hope this doesn’t trouble Master Alan.

Rosetta was one of the hostages and was sitting on the floor with her arms and legs bound behind her. After sitting on the hard floor for the past few hours, her legs were numb. She was the furthest from the pirates, so the possibility of her escaping when she saw an opening wasn’t zero, but the prospect wasn’t good when her legs felt weighted with lead. She didn’t know if their captors had planned this, but the situation the hostages were in made escape impossible.

“I’m sorry this happened to you the first time you visited my store, little maid,” said the shopkeeper, who was also tied up like

Rosetta.

“No, this isn’t your fault.” Rosetta was relatively calm for the situation they were in. Things were certainly scary, but it sounded like the pirates’ demands were being obediently followed, so they’d have nothing to gain by killing any hostages.

Besides, it should be about time for Master Alan to notice I’m missing. Rosetta always brought Alan breakfast thirty minutes before he started work, but that time had long since passed. It shouldn’t take him too much time to figure out she was involved in the hostage situation if he heard word in the castle.

I don’t doubt for a second that Master Alan would come to my rescue if he found out I had been taken hostage.

A small grin unfit for the current situation spread on Rosetta’s face while she thought that.

Either way, it was essential for her to quietly stay put for the moment. Unfortunately, not everyone could remain calm under pressure like Rosetta.

“Hey, aren’t you guys thirsty?” the shopkeeper asked the pirates.

“What?”

“There’s some good wine on the second kitchen shelf. How about you take the opportunity to drink it?”

The pirates all glanced in the direction of the kitchen, when—

“Aaaaargh!”

The shopkeeper gave a battle cry as she rammed into their leader, Betts.

“Gwah!”

Taken by surprise, Betts tumbled to the floor along with the shopkeeper.

“Come on! This is our chance to run away!” the shopkeeper told the other hostages.

“Lightning Element, Tenth Magic!” Still on the floor, Betts fired a ball that sparked with flames from his hand, right at the feet of the hostages who were escaping.

“What the—” The shopkeeper was taken by surprise. She never even considered the possibility that Betts could use magic.

“Hah! That guy cut me off before I could show it yesterday, but I’m the best at magic in all of Silver Fang. You get your asses back here if you don’t wanna be charcoal!” Betts shouted in rage.

The hostages had no choice but to obey him. At least, even if they’d tried to escape, the pirates were unlikely to harm them; things would be over for them if they lost their hostages.

“Sup, wench? You’ve got some spunk. I like that.” Betts pulled the shopkeeper to her feet by her hair.

“We’ve got a buncha hostages, so losing one’s no biggie, ain’t it?”

Off her,” he ordered one of his underlings.

“Sure thing, bro.” The pirate raised his saber above the shopkeeper. She shut her eyes tight.

Oh no!

Rosetta scanned her surroundings but couldn’t find anything to help her. That was when the door slammed open. She turned around, hoping that Alan had come to the rescue.

“Okay, time out. Let’s stop this here, yeah?”

She heard a listless voice, completely unsuited to the situation at hand.

“Say what?” The pirate stopped his saber midswing and looked at the door. In the doorway stood the ostentatiously dressed but drooping Kevin Laphicet.

“C’mon, just drop everything and surrender, okay? I’ll put in a good word for you to make your sentence a light one,” Kevin said.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” The pirates burst into laughter as soon as Kevin finished.

“Oh man, I was wondering who it was, but it’s just the frail great *hero* from yesterday,” one of the underlings said.

“What, did you come to get your ass kicked by the great Hero Slayer Betts again?” Betts said.

They’re really lording it over Master Kevin, Rosetta thought. She supposed it was a given after what had happened the day before. Even her heart had fallen when it wasn’t Alan at the door.

Still, something about him seems...different from yesterday?

Kevin still looked as limp as an overcooked noodle, but she now sensed an undercurrent of intensity in the way he carried himself. It was the same force that had made her reflexively bow her head that she felt from the other heroes during the meeting.

“Seems like no one feels like letting me enjoy my retirement in peace,” Kevin grumbled, then drew the two hunting swords on either side of his waist.

Rosetta widened her eyes in surprise. He had eased himself into a stance with a sword in both hands that was both natural and devoid of openings.

Perhaps I will finally get to witness it. She wanted to see the strength of the man who had defeated a shenmo during the Titanomachy—someone who was second only to Alan in the number of enemies he’d crushed.

The pirates fell silent as they could also sense the difference in his demeanor from yesterday.

“Hey! Don’t forget we have hostages here.” Flustered, one of the

underlings pointed his saber at the shopkeeper.

“Don’t do anything dangerous, now,” Kevin said.

“What in the—” The pirate was shocked to see Kevin appear in front of him before he could even blink.

He’s fast! Rosetta, along with everyone else in the room, hadn’t been able to follow that movement with their eyes.

From below, Kevin kicked the pirate’s hand, knocking his weapon away.

“Dammit! He’s taking us for fools!” The three pirates surged forward to attack Kevin in unison. “Now diiiieee!”

“Hmm... A diagonal shoulder slash, a tackle at my legs, and a magic attack at the same time,” Kevin said quietly.

Betts’s underlings rushed at Kevin. One of them slashed upward at him from a diagonal angle, while the other one went for his legs.

“Lightning Element, Tenth Magic...” Behind them, Betts was chanting his magic.

What?! Rosetta was stunned. The three pirates had moved exactly as Kevin had predicted.

“Whoa there.” Kevin stomped on the head of the pirate going for his legs, jumped off of it, then used the momentum to knee the sword-wielding pirate in the jaw.

“Gah!” With his brain rattled and his eyes rolling back in his head, the sword slipped out of the pirate’s hand before he could strike. Kevin swung his hunting sword at the middle of the sword’s blade. With a loud clang, the steel split, and Kevin roundhouse kicked the broken blade right at Betts.

“Huh?”

Betts was far too slow to react to Kevin’s fluid, efficient motion, so the blade buried into his right thigh.

“Argh!”

But he had more to worry about than his leg.

“Oh no, you shouldn’t do that. It’s dangerous to lose focus while preparing lightning magic, especially if you have something metal on you,” Kevin said.

“N-No!”

Betts had been gathering lightning in front of his hand to direct at Kevin, but the sudden pain broke his concentration and made him lose focus on the lightning. Now, what would happen since he had a metal blade sticking out of his body? The answer quickly became clear.

Bzzzzzzzzt!

“Graaaaaaargh!”

Betts was struck by the very lightning bolt he had been aiming at Kevin.

Wow. Rosetta felt a shiver shoot down her spine. No matter how

skilled they were, no one—not even Alan—could read their enemies so perfectly, yet Kevin had made it look trivial. All because he could go back after he had witnessed what unfolded.

“So this is the most powerful Unique Skill, Save and Load,” Rosetta said. It was certainly unrivaled.

“Agh...” Betts was somehow still on his feet despite having just taken his own lightning attack.

“You’re a tough one,” Kevin said. He levered the two underlings off of the floor using the back of his blade and tossed them at Betts like overstuffed sacks of potatoes.

“Blergh!” Betts staggered backward, unable to deflect the two of them.

“Sing, o whirlwind that gallops across the meadow.” Kevin’s incantation caused wind to swirl around the sword in his right hand.

The Unrivaled Gadabout was adept in the elemental magic of wind. If wind mana was left alone, it had the tendency to disperse and fill the air. Therefore, if a large quantity of it was held in the same location by force, given direction, and released all at once, it became a powerful weapon that could blow everything away.



Once enough wind had gathered, Kevin spoke. “First Spring Breeze, Morning Swallow!”

Whoosh!

Kevin swung his word horizontally, causing all of the air gathered around it to rush toward the three pirates. The pirates didn’t even have the time to scream as they were blown out of the store by the roaring winds, and they only stopped flying when they crashed into the wall of a building across the street.

“Using magic really takes a lot out of me. I must be getting on in years,” Kevin said before sheathing his swords. His expression lost any hint of the combat readiness previously present and sagged back to his usual listless one.

His eyes met with Rosetta’s. “Oh, if it isn’t Alan’s cute little attendant. You were captured? What terrible luck. I bet Alan would rush here to save you if he knew.”

“So you really are strong, Master Kevin,” Rosetta said in awe.

“I never called myself weak, did I?” Kevin replied with a chuckle, not particularly proud of himself.

At around the same time, a large ship a little out to sea was approaching the harbor closest to the store where the hostage incident was taking place. It was one of the main pirate ships of the international pirate organization known as Silver Fang. It was sixty-five meters long, equipped with around sixty cannons, and weighed over one thousand tons. Its crew consisted of over five hundred ruffians who possessed the skills necessary for both sailing and naval combat. Kingdoms who owned ships this large could be counted on the fingers of one hand—yet the entire pirate ship was taken over in a matter of minutes by a lone man who suddenly appeared on board.

“Of course, I expected you would come here,” Alan Granger told the pirates, who were collapsed on the deck of the ship while he sat on a barrel. “The ship Betts and his group demanded would obviously belong to this kingdom. After they were out at sea, the ship would be identified immediately; that’s why the kingdom so readily agreed to their demands. But the ocean is like a pirate’s backyard, so any member of Silver Fang would know it’s risky to travel in a hijacked kingdom ship.”

There was only one conclusion for Alan to arrive at: Betts and his men had a way to escape the kingdom’s ships, provided they managed to leave port.

“In other words,” Alan continued, “they were always planning to meet up with this ship somewhere close to the harbor. Four hours

seemed too long to get a ship ready for them, so it was probably giving you enough time to come meet them. Well, you don't have to be Isabella to figure out this plan."

"Ugh..." A pirate lying on the floor groaned in pain. "So this is the Champion of Light. He's a monster...just like the boss said..."

"Your boss should still be Greg, right? Tell him to sit quietly for now, or I'll come catch him personally," Alan said. He thrust the sword he had tended to yesterday in front of the pirate's eyes.

"Eek!"

He expected his threat would work, most likely. If pirate activity decreased even a fraction, he would better be able to focus on his fight with the demon army.

Alan heaved a sigh and turned in the direction of Berry Bakery. "Kevin should be rescuing the hostages right about now."

That evening, Kevin stood once again before Reece's grave, just like he had in the morning. There was nothing in front of the grave; the flower he'd left there had likely been blown away by the wind.

"I know this isn't exactly the same, but here you go," Kevin said before plucking a tiny flower—about as big as the nail on his pinky—that had been growing nearby. He placed it before the grave as he thought back to Reece's final moments.

Reece had been lying down, weary, on a white bed. The color had drained from her body and no vitality was left in her eyes. Much like Kevin, she'd been through countless life-and-death battles, so she could tell that her flickering human life was about to sputter and burn out. Kevin had been close to her, sitting next to her bed, holding her thin and cold hand in both of his own.

I'm so powerless, Kevin had thought.

Even Save and Load could do nothing to stop a natural death. Being there for Reece had been the only thing he could do for her.

"Hey, Kevin? Will you do me just one favor?"

"Yes. I'll do anything, *anything*, if you wish for it."

"Thank you. Then...I entrust this kingdom and its people to you," Reece had said while gripping Kevin's hands with her own frail one, as hard as she could.

"You can leave them to me, Reece. You can be sure of that."

"Thank you, Kevin...and I'm sorry. Sorry for leaving you all alone."

Kevin had shook his head from side to side without a word as if to

tell her not to worry. Reece had looked at him with a relaxed yet wistful expression and quietly closed her eyes.

“You’re right, I made a promise,” Kevin mumbled while looking at Reece’s grave, then turned around. “So, what do you two want?”

Alan and Rosetta were standing behind him.

“Seems like Rosetta would like to express her gratitude,” Alan said.

Rosetta took a step forward and said, “I failed to thank you for coming to my rescue earlier. Thank you very much.” She lowered her head in a deep bow.

“It’s fine, don’t make it such a big deal.” Kevin casually waved his hand at her. “Hey, Alan?”

“What is it, Kevin?”

“I’ll join the fight against the demon army, as big of a pain as it might be.”

Rosetta’s mouth was left wide open in surprise while Alan grinned.

“I’d expect no less from my comrade in arms,” Alan said.

“The way your face says, ‘Just as expected, I’ve been waiting,’ is kind of annoying,” Kevin said.

Alan laughed good-naturedly. “Don’t be like that. With you on our side, it’s like having the strength of a million men.”

“I don’t want to hear that from the Great Champion who will outperform me anyway,” Kevin complained.

Despite their banter, Alan and Kevin clasped their hands in a firm handshake.

Chapter 3: The Final Form Villainess

As Alan and Rosetta were heading to meet Kevin, a man named Daniel McCrory was on his way to the Fourth Kingdom in a shaky, highly guarded carriage. The Fourth Kingdom was named Orange Gallery, the Kingdom of the Sun and the Arts, and he had been dispatched there from the First Kingdom. He was a tall, slender, and striking young man whose face overflowed with confidence. While he was only in his early twenties, he was the First Kingdom's Minister of Culture and an unparalleled prodigy.

When Daniel was ten years old, he had attained the highest score on the entrance exam for the Whitehyde Academic Research Institution, the highest institute of education in the capital; graduated at the top of his class with aplomb; then entered the Ministry of Culture. His innate talent helped him jog right up the stairway of success until he ascended to the role of Minister of Culture at the age of twenty-one. While he did have the backing of his esteemed noble family, the speed of his success was largely thanks to his own brilliance.

The task Daniel had been assigned was to receive the final signature for the common front treaty concerning the current war from the Fourth Kingdom's queen, Isabella Stuart.

"Hmph, why did she assign this mundane errand literally anyone could do to *me*?"

For better or worse, Daniel's competence had made him elitist and proud. From his perspective, even if it was a direct order from the empress herself, making him do what was essentially gofer work was reason enough for protest.

However, despite his misgivings, this wasn't a task just anyone could accomplish. A common front treaty for such a large-scale war involved negotiations around topics such as the exchange of an immense number of supplies, or the authorization of one kingdom's military to trespass on another's territory. One wrong step could lead humanity into a full-blown civil war. The duty of receiving the final signature for such a treaty, and from a queen herself, couldn't be left to someone of inadequate standing.

The Kingdom of the Sun and the Arts was the center of art and culture amongst the seven great kingdoms. In that respect, Daniel, as the First Kingdom's Minister of Culture, was the perfect

representative. His sharp mind made that obvious to him, but he felt that a job with no need for strategy was beneath him.

My intellect should be used more creatively, on jobs centered around budget or personnel assignment.

He believed doing so would benefit the First Kingdom, and by extension, all of humanity. Once this was over with, he could return to his important original duties.

Daniel finally arrived at the Fourth Kingdom, his mind full of dissatisfaction. As his carriage traveled forward, he saw elegantly decorated buildings all around him, while painters and musicians demonstrating their skill filled the streets. In the Fourth Kingdom, art flourished. More than any other area, it had escaped destruction during the great war, and thus had a significant number of surviving historic buildings and items of high cultural significance, far more than even the symbol of authority, the First Kingdom.

“The Minister of Culture here must have a hard time managing the budget,” Daniel said.

Though his words for his fellow minister were sympathetic, his tone was that of a hunter eyeing large prey. The minister’s position here would entail managing both valuable cultural heritage and the promotion of newly emerging culture, a job which required the extensive knowledge and mathematical expertise necessary for figuring out the optimal location, amount of budget, and personnel deployment for projects—something that was right up Daniel’s alley.

“I’d love a chance to work as the Minister of Culture for this kingdom.”

Daniel’s carriage and its guard escort continued further into the kingdom for another five hours, until they eventually arrived at the royal palace. The building was dazzling, constructed from a series of walls that stretched as they sought to pierce the clouds, each topped with roofs on round pillars. While the First Kingdom’s palace was also dignified and luxurious in its way, it was somewhat old-fashioned, plain, and sturdy. The Fourth Kingdom’s palace had a brilliance that trumpeted its beauty to the heavens.

The front gate opened and a woman greeted Daniel. “We are pleased to have you here, Minister Daniel.” The polite woman was around her late thirties, but an observer might have guessed younger. “My name is Cecilia, Her Majesty Isabella Stuart’s attendant,” she said, then gave him an elegant curtsy.

Cecilia was no longer young, but her face was lovely, and she looked neat and tidy with her glossy blonde hair tied to the side. The beauty and modest allure of her meticulously refined curtsy would

surely charm most men somewhat. She certainly had that much appeal.

“Let’s skip the pleasantries. I want to finish my work soon,” Daniel said in a hurried tone. He wasn’t there to gawk at women in a foreign kingdom’s palace. He found these polite formal greetings a waste of his time.

Cecilia didn’t display any discomfort in response to his attitude. “Understood. Please follow me,” she said, then guided him into the palace.

The inside of the palace was extensively decorated with what seemed to be high-end pieces of art. Despite being the Minister of Culture, Daniel was only interested in such objects within the boundaries of work, so to his eye it was an extreme waste of space.

Isabella Stuart, huh? Looks like she’s a worthless excuse for a human being, just as the rumors say.

He surmised that a person who thoughtlessly gathered an abundance of useless trinkets could only be an incompetent. Her brain was empty, so she wanted to fill that void with expensive junk. He had no regard for her history as a hero who had helped save the world around the time he was born; in the end, she was a disappointment.

“Her Majesty is waiting for you inside. Please enter,” Cecilia said. She stood to the side of yet another luxuriously ornamented door.

I’m going to have a hard time keeping my thoughts off of my face, Daniel thought. His opinion of the Fourth Kingdom’s queen was already at rock bottom, after all. He straightened himself and adopted a flat expression similar to Cecilia’s before opening the door and going inside. *Let’s see what kind of vulgar, gaudy room this collector queen has in store for me.*

However, the scene that unfolded before him was beyond his imagination.

“Oh my, they’ve sent quite the lovely boy as a messenger.”

An elegant woman was sitting on a large, plush sofa. Her relaxed choice of seating was perfectly normal for a monarch; one couldn’t go so far as calling it impolite. The interior design was dripping with opulence, which was to be expected at this point. However, being greeted by the sight of her being waited upon by several handsome, naked young men was awfully unconventional, to say the least. The woman was resting her legs on the back of a man who was on all fours and looking at Daniel with a pleasant smile.

Daniel was at a loss for words. He never imagined coming across such a scene on official messenger business on behalf of the empress herself. *This was the Fourth Kingdom’s queen, Isabella Stuart the Final Form Villainess? But his surprise didn’t stop there.*

That’s impossible. She’s supposed to be forty-two years old, but she

looks like she's in her early twenties.

She was tall for a woman, with long, slender limbs, and her buoyant curves gave her a perfect figure that was accentuated by the orange dress she wore. She had makeup on, but her skin had an unbelievably youthful radiance. Her captivating beauty was as much a work of art as the decorations on the walls.



Empress Margaret and the attendant who had led him there, Cecilia, both looked young for their age, but Isabella was on another level. The healthy complexion characteristic of young women and the ensnaring allure of experienced, mature women coexisted in miraculous harmony on her face. Daniel was also young and handsome, not to mention a member of the elite, so countless women had made advances on him. He'd always turned them down without hesitation, as he considered love affairs senseless drivel. Nonetheless, Isabella radiated a charm that could even captivate his heart, if he let her.

"My, if you focus such a passionate gaze on me, I'm going to get hot and bothered myself." Isabella raised her red-painted lips in a smile and laughed provocatively.

Daniel inadvertently clicked his tongue when Isabella noticed that his eyes had been drawn to her. Letting the other party set the pace made a proud man like him uncomfortable.

"Idle conversation is a waste of time. Let's move on to business," Daniel said.

Isabella laughed again in response to his words.

"Is something funny?" Daniel asked.

"You're so adorable with that uptight look on your face, boy. Shall I bear a child for you?" Isabella made her offer in a patronizing voice as she rolled up the hem of her dress to expose her fair, slender thighs. Such a seductive gesture would make anyone lose their cool.

Surprisingly, Daniel lost his cool for a completely different reason. "You may be the queen, but this is blatant disrespect toward Her Imperial Majesty's messenger!" As a prodigy, he'd excelled ever since he was a child, so this was the first time anyone had treated him with such condescension. Not to mention, meeting with a messenger while being served by her army of boy toys was extremely rude on its own.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry." Isabella responded to Daniel's outburst with an unconcerned smile. "But what am I to do here? There's no fun in an exchange where you simply ask me to sign and I comply."

"This is neither the time nor the place to be talking about fun. Enough is enough," Daniel said in a low, irritated voice, but Isabella didn't so much as raise an eyebrow. She spent a moment thinking, then curved her lips as if she'd had a revelation.

"Let's play a game of chess. If you win, I'll sign the treaty," Isabella said.

What a preposterous suggestion. Does this woman think our diplomatic exchange is some kind of game? Daniel thought.

Noting his irritated reaction, Isabella added, "And what's more, I'm going to apologize for my earlier discourtesy, on my knees if you

so wish.”

“Oh? Now that’s interesting.” Daniel didn’t want to spend a second longer in the company of such an unpleasant woman, but the prospect of having a queen grovel at his feet once wasn’t bad.

It so happened that he was the First Kingdom’s chess champion. His orthodox and precise tactics had earned him the moniker “Precision Machine,” and no one in his kingdom was his match. In fact, the number of people in the entire world who could hold a candle to him was in the single digits. No matter how confident Isabella was in her skill, there was no way he would lose.

“Heh heh! I see I’ve caught your attention. Cecilia, get things ready,” Isabella said.

Cecilia brought a chess set and a chair for Daniel to sit on, and left them in front of Isabella.

“Will a handicap be necessary, Your Majesty?” Daniel asked while taking his seat.

“No, I don’t need one. But let’s make this game a quick one. How about a time limit of twenty minutes? I hope you don’t mind, my dear domestic champion,” Isabella said with a mischievous smile on her face.

“So you already knew?”

“There’s nothing you know that I don’t.”

Cold sweat leapt to Daniel’s back. He swallowed.

“Now, shall we get started?” she asked.

“This can’t be...” Daniel mumbled. In the five games they’d played so far, he hadn’t won once. Isabella had even given him a handicap in the last one and played without her queen. He still lost.

“You’re such an adorable boy,” Isabella said with a chuckle. She was smiling benevolently as she watched him agonize over the chessboard with his head lowered.

Why? How could it be? Daniel thought.

If Isabella had turned out to be a better chess player than him, he could’ve swallowed it, but that hadn’t proven the case. In terms of pure chess skill, he was without a doubt her superior. However, it seemed as if she could predict his every move, and she’d completely thrown him off his game. The short time limit had added to his stress, and he kept making mistakes that she instantly capitalized on to snatch victory. Every match ended before he could demonstrate his full strength.

“In a game, the one who betrays their opponent’s expectations and outsmarts them is the victor,” Isabella said as her long, thin fingers fiddled with the king she’d taken from Daniel. “The sour, the sweet,

and the bitter betrayals—I'm here now because I drank deeply of all of them. Even if you're better at chess, I'm better at people."

Daniel could only bite his lip and sit silently before the terrifying might of the monster of politics, Isabella Stuart. *The Final Form Villainess*, a nickname he'd heard in passing before and assumed was overblown. In his defeat, he had come to understand the reason behind it.

"Villainess" was a name Isabella had been born into; even as a child, she'd been called it by her peers at school. Her family, the Lightwise nobles, had been long-standing enemies of the royal family in her kingdom. Although the Lightwises were already a powerful family, they had sought to seize royal power for themselves. To the royals, what else could her family have been but villains?

Daniel had heard the postwar court was a despicable place, with backhanded internal politics that would make anyone shudder. Isabella had clawed her way to the top of all of it by arranging to have her husband, the king, executed. With his death, Isabella had become the unimpeded head of state in the Fourth Kingdom.

That had been how Isabella earned the "Final Form" part of her nickname, as she was the one to finally fulfill her family's desire for conquest. The woman sitting before Daniel held this vast kingdom in the palm of her hand as certainly as she held his king piece.

She isn't an opponent someone like me can beat. Even the proud Daniel had no choice but to admit that after she had painfully demonstrated the difference between them.

Isabella chuckled. "Relax, boy. I'll still sign the treaty. After all, this kingdom's beautiful works of art are in danger of being destroyed by the barbaric demon army. We'll need to turn the screws on them a little, don't you think?"

There was something else Daniel had learned from their game.

Defensive measures against the demon army had officially been initiated in the hero meeting ten days earlier. From his perspective as someone working directly for the government, things had progressed with unnatural ease since then. For the seven great human kingdoms to combine forces, coordination was necessary not just on the military side but also in politics. Despite the coming threat, he knew there would always be those who interfered with such cooperation to protect their profits. With that in mind, how could the seven kingdoms have so easily prepared for war?

It was clear to him now that Isabella was the one responsible for making that strange state of affairs a reality.

The Seven Heroes are truly humanity's trump card.

In that way, the elite young bureaucrat who had missed the era of those seven came to understand why humanity's fate had been

entrusted to them, then and now.

Chapter 4: Preparing for War

After securing the cooperation of Kevin Laphicet the Unrivaled Gadabout, Alan and Rosetta returned to the First Kingdom posthaste and reported the development to Empress Margaret Whitehyde.

“Thang you zo muuuuuuch! Das great neeeeeews! I was sho worried about what to do if he really didn’t agree to heeeeeelp!!!” Margaret hugged the two of them in a grand display of tears and snot that thankfully remained unseen by any outsiders. Receiving thanks personally from the empress herself, the highest authority of all humanity, was quite the honor, but Rosetta would rather not have snot on her uniform.

Margaret gave them a day off to rest from the long trip despite the fact the rest of the kingdom bustled with activity as it prepared for war. In Rosetta’s mind, a day off for Alan was all well and good, but she had no intention of neglecting her duty of tending to him just because he had no work.

“Listen, Rosetta. This is an order from Her Imperial Majesty herself. Don’t worry about me, just go rest,” Alan told her. She couldn’t object to a direct command from her master himself, so she ended up taking a day off for the first time in a while.

“I don’t actually know what to do now that I have the free time,” Rosetta said with a sigh as she walked around the courtyard of the royal palace. It was around noon, when she’d usually be serving Alan his lunch or preparing for her afternoon work. Without any of her duties, she had so much free time she was bored out of her mind. It wasn’t like she had anything else she wanted to do, so what was the harm in letting her work?

“Master Alan, you dummy,” Rosetta said. She fiddled with her bright red hair as she sat on a bench in the courtyard.

“Um, excuse me, could you please stand up for a moment? I’d like to sweep under the bench.”

Rosetta looked up to see a contrite janitor who was sweeping the courtyard with his broom. “Oh, I’m sorry for getting in the way,” Rosetta replied before jumping up. She mentally chastised herself for not being considerate enough to stand up before he could ask.

“Oh no, don’t worry about it. I appreciate it,” the middle-aged janitor said. He bowed his head deeply, then proceeded to sweep the leaves and dust under the bench with efficient motions that betrayed

his familiarity with such work.

Wait a minute... I feel like I've seen him somewhere before, Rosetta thought. She had a hunch that it was at a really important place. When she took a closer look at the man, he wasn't dressed like a servant, which meant that he wasn't part of the palace staff. He had a medium build, was around Alan's age, and his amicable-looking eyebrows and eyes drooped a little at the ends.

"Ah!" Rosetta shouted.

The man started. "Whoa, you almost gave me a heart attack! What's wrong?"

"Hey, you! Aren't you one of the Seven Heroes?!" He'd been right at home acting as a janitor, and he seemed like an ordinary person, so it took her a while to realize—the man standing before her was undoubtedly one of the individuals who had been seated at the same round table as Alan during the hero meeting.

"Oh, yes, you're right. I'm Yoshida the Villager." The hero bowed to her in a very cordial manner.



“Boy, the wind is strong during this season, so there’s lots of leaves around,” Yoshida said as he swept around the courtyard. He appeared to be quite skilled, even from the perspective of Rosetta, a maid whose predominant responsibility was to clean up after her master.

“Excuse me, but what are you doing in the First Kingdom’s palace, Mister Yoshida? You won’t say you came here to sweep the courtyard, right?” Rosetta asked him. All heroes should have returned to their respective kingdoms immediately after the meeting. Why would he have gone to the trouble of coming back here?

“I’m actually here to exchange information on personnel deployment regarding our defensive strategy.” Yoshida showed Rosetta a map of the continent with the positions for personnel deployment drawn on it. “I’ve already gone through the Second to Sixth Kingdoms; this is my last stop.”

“Isn’t that just a messenger’s job?” The Seven Heroes usually had messengers exchange information between kingdoms, for obvious reasons. The heroes’ main role was to use their immense strengths to battle for their kingdoms. It would be a disaster if their kingdom was attacked while they were away visiting another one. Apart from Alan, who’d been gone until yesterday, all the heroes had to remain in their kingdoms and ready themselves for any possible attack.

Yoshida placed his hand on his head in a sheepish manner. “Well, here’s the thing. As much as it embarrasses me to admit it, I’m the only one among the Seven Heroes not *quite* adept at combat.”

“Is that so...”

“Oh? You don’t believe me?”

“It’s just that I recently met one of the Seven Heroes who seemed terribly weak at first, but that wasn’t the case.”

“Ah, you must mean Kevin. True, his first impression might be misleading, but I really am weak. Hmm, let’s see...” Yoshida took a look around until he found an empty table in the courtyard. “Let’s have a round of arm wrestling.”

Yoshida placed his right arm on the table. Doubt was written all over Rosetta’s face, but she, too, placed her right arm on the table and grabbed his hand.

“Here we go. Ready, start! Fngh!” Yoshida gave the starting signal and immediately put strength into his arm. On instinct, Rosetta did the same. “Mrnnngh!”

“Huh? It’s so light!” Rosetta said. Yoshida was exerting such effort that he’d gone red in the face, but all she could feel was a gentle pressure she could easily withstand.

“Grmngh!” Yoshida grunted with all his might.

“Hup!” She exerted a little more strength.

“Yeowch!” In a flash, his entire body toppled over and he slammed into the ground face-first.

“So weak!” Rosetta cried, shocked at the extent of his frailty. “Are you okay?!”

“Ha ha ha, I’m fine!” Yoshida gave her a thumbs up, even though his nose was bleeding. “What a shame. That was the best I’ve done in the last decade.”

“You call that your best?! I wasn’t even serious yet—and we must treat your nosebleed!” She rushed over to him and stopped the bleeding with a simple healing spell.

“Oh, I really appreciate that,” he said. “Anyway, now you have the facts. I couldn’t help in combat even if I stayed in my kingdom. This menial work is the only way I can contribute. I played a strictly supporting role during the Titanomachy too.”

“Isn’t that...a little strange? I thought the Seven Heroes were the ones who defeated the Seven Black Stars.”

“Well, I was support personnel in the decisive battle where we stormed the demon lord’s castle. At one point, I happened to come across one of the Seven Black Stars; I thought I was a goner.” For a man who couldn’t even beat Rosetta in arm strength, a head-on fight would be nothing short of a death sentence.

“However, the Black Star got caught up in a different enemy’s fight and died because of it. I got the credit for defeating the Black Star and was granted the title of one of the Seven Heroes. I’m not sure if it counts as good or bad luck,” Yoshida said with a gloomy expression.

“Wow, I see...”

“And I know I said I was one of the support personnel, but it’s not like I can use any strong support magic. I’m just an average Joe who happened to be there during the final battle,” Yoshida said with a chuckle.

It took a moment, but Rosetta accepted Yoshida’s explanation. She’d always wondered why Yoshida was the only hero who was simply “the Villager.” The Champion of Light, the Final Form Villainess, the Unrivaled Gadabout, History’s Strongest Sage, the Exiled Dark Priest, the Godfist Saint; he alone didn’t have some kind of powerful descriptor in his title.

“That’s how an ordinary guy like me wound up among all these incredible people. Since then, I’ve done my best to help in any way I can,” Yoshida said with a smile. Then, he gazed into the distance as his face grew grave. “The demon army could attack any moment now. I want to help with whatever preparations I can to enable the others to fight to the best of their ability.”

Rosetta almost choked when she heard that. He was speaking casually, but his words were heavy with the weight of history. Yoshida was so weak he'd lost even to her, but she recognized in him the spirit of someone who'd experienced the front lines of the Titanomachy. That's why his quiet words thrust an unavoidable reality upon her: the war was about to begin.

Shaken, Rosetta changed the topic abruptly. "That reminds me, there's something I've been meaning to ask."

"Hmm? What's that?"

"If the Seven Heroes fought, who would come out on top?"

"Well!" Yoshida folded his arms and hummed. "That's a common question, but I can't say for certain. Kevin and Norman are incredibly strong in a direct, one-on-one fight; if anything goes, then my money would be on Derek; if it's a war between entire kingdoms, Isabella would be a force to be reckoned with. But we can't forget Alan's incredible tenacity either. I would be the only one unlikely to win. Now, if the question is a straightforward one like, 'Who would come out on top in a contest of physical strength?' then the answer is simple."

"Who would it be?"

"Dora the Godfist Saint, of course. She could beat a fusion of the rest of us in arm wrestling with one hand."

The Second Kingdom, Asch Sanctuary, sat in the middle of the desert, its palace and the surrounding town protected by towering walls. Its territory was the smallest among the seven great kingdoms, but it was the holy land where the god of Continental Orthodoxy—the state religion shared by all seven great kingdoms—was said to have descended upon the world. Furthermore, it was abundant in energy resources, referred to as God's Grace, which made it a cornerstone of the seven great kingdoms.

This holy land had entered a state of emergency and war preparations were proceeding at a rapid pace. One such preparation was blockading the many entrances of their defensive walls. Normally, the walls were meant to defend against simpleminded monsters and sandstorms, but their enemies this time would be intelligent. If they wanted the enemy to focus on the fortified main gates, they had to leave those unsealed and make the other, smaller ones impenetrable. Otherwise, they would be inviting their enemies to attack from there.

"One, two! Pull, pull!" A soldier of the Combat Clergy Corps was giving instructions to the citizens as they attempted to pull a large boulder, which was over twenty meters tall, to block one of the entrances. It was a laborious task, with scores of people pulling on the

ropes tied to it, yet it moved at the pace of a dried-out snail on a hot day.

“Stop! Time for a short break!” At the soldier’s signal, the citizens let go of the ropes and sat down. They were provided with water and a snack while they rested.

“Phew, just a little more. We only need one last push.” The soldier wiped his own sweat and peered up at the defensive wall that was finally within reach. Just shouting orders under this blazing sun was an exhausting—and dehydrating—task. He sat down to take a break himself.

“What, tired already?” a familiar voice said from above him. He instantly straightened his back.

“C-Commander Dora!” The soldier bounded to his feet and threw himself into a salute.

Dora Alexandra, one of the two female members of the Seven Heroes, was nearly as tall as a young oak tree, with log-thick arms and legs to match. Her muscular body almost burst out of her nun’s habit, yet there was an hourglass shape to her body that was undeniably feminine. The scars whittled into her by many battles were proof of her long military service. She was a true hero, the Godfist Saint, who had stood as both the kingdom’s queen and commander general of the Combat Clergy Corps for decades.

“Oh, it’s Her Majesty!”

“We’re going to work hard too!”

“Let’s get through this fight together!”

The citizens happily waved at Dora. Their reaction was proof of how beloved and respected the queen was by her people.

“There’s no time to rest now that the commander has graced us with her presence!” the soldier called to the citizens, who excitedly raised their voices in response. He turned back to her and said, “The moment you came here, everyone started brimming with motivation. Your moniker of Mother of our Second Kingdom is a truly fitting one.”

“No, you can all relax now. Good work toughing it out in the heat, everyone,” Dora said before striding up to the boulder. She placed her large hands on it and flexed her iron-like biceps, then pushed it forward as if she were pushing a mere pebble.

“N-No way...” the soldier mumbled. “It took a crowd of adult men to move that boulder a few centimeters at a time!”

The boulder moved ahead of her like it had forgotten its own weight. It rolled into the gate with a thud, sealing it from both sides. She let go of it.

“That about does it,” she said.

The citizens erupted into cheers of joy, while the soldier was astonished anew after witnessing the feat of strength performed by his

commander general.

“She is truly the most reliable person there is,” the soldier said. He couldn’t help but sing her praises too. But he found it strange that Dora alone remained silent as she gazed deep into the distant haze of the sky.

“Is something the matter, Commander Dora?” he asked.

“The sound of the wind is in disarray,” she replied.

“The sound of the wind, you say?” The soldier placed a hand behind his ear but couldn’t hear anything special.

She shook her head. “Trust me. Sound can tell you far more than sight ever could.”

Ever since she was born, Dora had exhibited a Unique Skill called Fairy Sense. It allowed her to identify even minute sounds ordinary humans couldn’t perceive.

Her eyes shone sharply as she said, “They’ll be here soon.”

Beelzebub stood beside a one-eyed old woman in a plaza near the demon lord’s castle. The woman, who was a researcher of magic in his service, chanted an incantation in front of three grotesquely decorated jars, which were arranged around a pentagram drawn on the ground. Black miasma rose from the jars and into the sky, where it whirled like something alive and covered the sky above the castle in a sinister pattern.

“It appears that the dimension-stabilizing procedure has been successful, Greha,” Beelzebub said.

The one-eyed woman, Greha, turned around and said, “Correct, Lord Beelzebub. You can now use the Character Gate at all times.”

“At long last.” Beelzebub cracked a faint smile. Twenty-five long years after the end of the previous war, preparations were complete for the fight to begin anew.

“What destination would you like to set for the gate?” Greha asked.

“Make it lead to the location closest to the royal palace of each of the seven great human kingdoms.”

“Hmm... Are you absolutely certain? The palaces are certainly major facilities, but there are other locations important to the humans as well.”

“That won’t be necessary this time around, because the seal stones lie under those seven castles.”

Greha opened her eye wide. “Th-The seal stones, you say?!”

During the Titanomachy, the Seven Heroes had used magic to seal a certain disaster inside of magicités called the seal stones.

“It’s said that, should the sealed disaster be released, it will

eradicate humanity as a whole,” Greha said.

“True enough, and I’ve seen it with my own eyes. It will undoubtedly bring about the end of humanity.”

Greha was shocked to her very core. For the demon lord himself to say it, it must have been something dreadful beyond imagination.

“The spell they used to seal the disaster is called ‘Imperial Flower Hexagram Seal Array.’ If two or more of the seal stones used for it are destroyed, the seal will be lifted,” Beelzebub explained. “Most importantly, those stones cannot be moved.”

“I understand now. That means...”

“If we capture two out of the seven castles and destroy the seal stones beneath them, we can have humanity at our mercy. You could call it their weak point. Alan revealed that in front of me, someone who possesses eyes that can detect any falsehood.”

“Why would he put humanity at such a disadvantage?”

It would certainly allow the humans to predict where their opponents would attack, but to Beelzebub’s mind, the demerits far outweighed the merits.

“Probably to avoid damage from reaching other locations as much as possible. I can’t say I understand the sentiment, but I have nothing to lose by going along with it. The New Seven Black Stars don’t intend to waste time with petty tricks, nor do we have any need for them in the first place.” He was confident they would force the humans to surrender by demonstrating their overwhelming superiority, and Alan had only made that easier for them.

“In other words, in this battle, the Seven Heroes will protect the seal stones from the New Black Stars’ invasion. Do I understand your choice of tactics?” Greha asked. Beelzebub gave a composed nod in lieu of a spoken answer. “Very well. I will configure the gate to lead to the locations closest to the seven castles.”

The sound of loud footsteps interrupted the conversation between the two of them.

“Eyyy, looks like things’re ready.” The voice belonged to a tall man with a steely physique, a menacing air, and dragon scales covering his entire body.

“M-Master Georgios!”

“Already here? That’s so typical of you,” Beelzebub said with a small smile.

“You bet your sweet ass I’m here! I’ve been waiting so long I thought I’d drop dead from boredom. Same goes for them,” Georgios said as he gestured behind himself. Several large shapes glared out of the shadows at the three of them.

Georgios bent down and inspected Greha’s formula. “Let’s get on with—Hmm? Oi, Greha. Change the destination,” he said.

“B-But this is the closest to the seal stone, where—”

“Shaddup, moron,” Georgios interrupted. “You don’t get it at all. Why would you teleport me straight to the destination of my little trip? Enjoying the journey is where the real charm’s at, you feel me?”

A town and palace, isolated in the desert, encircled by towering walls, was the destination visible through the gate. Georgios watched it with a wicked grin on his face.

Chapter 5: Godfist Saint versus Tyrant Dragon 1

Contrary to Alan and the other heroes' expectations, the war wouldn't start in any of the seven great kingdoms.

The autonomous city of Necropolis, located near Asch Sanctuary, was one of the cities independent of the seven great kingdoms. Its main industry was the export of a natural resource that gushed out of the desert and could be used as fuel. Many kingdoms imported this fuel, allowing Necropolis to boast prominent wealth among the numerous independent cities.

Since it didn't belong to any of the seven great kingdoms, Necropolis would have to fend for itself in the event of an attack by the demon army. It had significant defensive measures in place, proportional to its great wealth, to protect itself.

"Fifty anti-demon turrets have been deployed, sir!" a young Necropolis guard reported to the commander of his unit. "Two thousand guards wearing composite fiber combat uniforms made by the Humanity Defense Coalition have also been deployed, all equipped with the latest weaponry!"

The mustachioed middle-aged commander nodded. "Very well. We belong to no kingdom, so we are responsible for protecting ourselves."

"But I have to say, I feel a little sorry for the demons attacking us," the young soldier said with a strained laugh. The numbers of weapons and personnel responsible for protecting Necropolis could be called excessive for a city of its size.

The commander gave a hearty chuckle. "No, this is good for us. I quite like the thought of us being called heroes after defeating the demons here." During the Titanomachy, the commander had only been an apprentice and had barely participated in the front lines. Peace was always preferable to war, of course, but with conflict coming up on the horizon, any soldier would want accolades.

Dreams of success were filling the commander's head when a sudden development snapped him back to reality.

"Wh-What the heck is that?!" One of the lookouts was shouting while pointing to the west.

The commander followed the direction of the lookout's gesture to see an approaching cloud of sand that could easily be mistaken for a

desert twister, with a nightmare at its center.

“Wa ha ha ha ha ha ha! Check out that bunch of buildings and humans straight ahead!”

“What a pain. Can’t let them get in the way of our pleasant ride.”

Approaching Necropolis at great speed was a group of demons riding on large, wingless, bounding wyverns. What stood out the most was the size of those wyverns: each one was larger than a building. *Hundreds* of them were charging toward the city, and the soldiers quickly realized that their reliable defensive weapons, which had seemed more than enough only moments ago, were no match for this. The soldiers could only stare at the sight with their mouths agape.

“Hey, boss! How do you want us to do this?” one of the wyvern riders shouted while looking behind him.

Needless to say, the man he called “boss” was none other than Georgios of the New Seven Black Stars, clad in dragon scales, his eyes ferocious. He was riding on a wyvern at the tail end of the formation, relaxed on a luxurious sofa he had tied to its back, while one of his underlings managed the steering.

“Destroy and plunder. To enjoy ourselves,” Georgios said with a wicked grin.

“You said it! To enjoy ourselves!” his underlings cheered in unison.

“R-Ready the turrets.” The commander came to his senses and issued orders to his soldiers, but it was already too late. Over two hundred large wyverns broke through the walls and poured into the city with the force of a raging river.

In just a few hours, the peaceful Necropolis had been transformed into a hellscape. Buildings had collapsed into rubble and fires had spread from the remnants across the city. It couldn’t even have been called a fight.

It was this hellish scene that Georgios was taking a leisurely stroll through. People screamed as they tried to escape, but they were easily captured; the men were struck down immediately, while the women were raped before their vicious deaths.

“Destroy it all,” he said in a sing-song voice.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha!” As if in response, a demon ran a man through with his spear and fed him to his wyvern.

“Plunder it all,” Georgios said.

“Come on! Scream more for me! Make sure we enjoy this!” a different demon said with ruthless delight as the woman he was violating screamed in agony.

Perfect, Georgios thought. He was in a great mood. He closed his

eyes and listened to the screams as if they were the finest orchestra. “Gaudier, ghastlier, let loose and follow your whims. To enjoy ourselves!”

“You bastaaaards!” the near-death Necropolis commander screamed. He rammed a turret on a pulley into Georgios from the blind spot of a nearby building.

“Watch out, boss!” One of Georgios’s men noticed the surprise attack and shouted to warn him.

Georgios himself noticed it too, but a second too late. A loud explosion echoed as the turret hit him point-blank.

“How do you like that, filthy demons!” the commander said between heavy gasps. Most of the soldiers had already been killed and the city was in ruins, but he had still carried out this suicidal attack. It was his last chance to retaliate against these savages, even just one hit.

But it was to no avail.

“What, did a fly land on me or something?” Georgios held the cannonball—which was over one meter in diameter—with a single hand.



“What?!” The commander’s expression transformed into one of shock and despair.

The weapon he’d used was the Humanity Defense Coalition’s latest anti-demon turret. By replacing gunpowder with volatile magicite, its destructive power was increased several times. The turrets’ effectiveness had been demonstrated plenty during the attack two weeks prior. At the very least, it had been reported that the former members of the Seven Black Stars had needed to defend against their bombardment. That should have been proof that the turrets were powerful enough to damage a demon with a direct hit. In spite of that, this man had stopped the attack at point-blank range without even blinking.

“You moron, don’t you know? I’m the strongest and everyone else is trash.” Georgios applied a little strength to his hand and the steel cannonball crumbled to pieces like a cookie.

“This can’t be...” The commander fell to his knees in dismay.

Georgios pointed at the broken man. “Destroy and plunder,” he ordered his underlings.

“Hell yeeeeaaaaah!!!” the demons cried in unison. In a whirl of blades, they turned the commander into minced meat.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!” Georgios started walking through the devastated Necropolis again, his sinister laughter filling the air. “Destroy it all. Plunder it all. To enjoy ourselves. To enjoy *myself*.”

Screams of terror and death throes from the humans mingled with cries of delight from the demons to form a gruesome melody, with the sound of flesh clashing and being crushed as a macabre accompaniment. The hellish sounds echoed around the nightmare the city had become.

Georgios the Tyrant Dragon strutted around the city, appreciating the carnage with the sincerity of a true connoisseur. “That takes care of the appetizer. Eat to your hearts’ content, you damn hyenas. The next prey will be bigger,” he said, staring in the direction of Asch Sanctuary.

Defensive preparations were mostly complete in the Second Kingdom and its people were finally ready for war. Dora Alexandra, queen and commander general of the Combat Clergy Corps—the kingdom’s de facto military—was walking around town and listening to the voices in the air.

“We’re really about to fight, huh?”

“What, getting cold feet?”

“C’m on, can you blame me? I don’t wanna die. What about you?”

“Same here. I just got married too.”

Armed soldiers walked around and chatted with each other.

“You come back home safely, you hear me?”

“I will, Mom.”

In front of houses facing the street, worried mothers sent their sons off.

This scene feels so nostalgic, Dora thought. She heard many people’s conversations as she headed to the largest hospital in the kingdom.

Once inside, she traveled straight to a heavily guarded hospital room.

“Mommy!”

The pregnant girl lying on the bed waved at Dora as soon as she saw her. She was Sheila Alexandra, Dora’s sixteen-year-old daughter. Most women would be filled with anxiety with the date of their delivery so close at hand, but Sheila was beaming and lively. She’d always been rather frail, but her cheerful attitude was second to none. However, someone else was nervous enough for the both of them.

“Haah... Why did the demons have to attack at a time like this?”

A small and timid-looking man heaved a dejected sigh. This worrywart was Dora’s husband and the king of Asch Sanctuary, Maurice Alexandra. Not only was he fifteen years younger than her, but he also had a tender baby face that gave him an air of unreliability.

“Don’t worry, Daddy. Mommy will do away with any enemy that comes here!” Maurice’s pregnant daughter heartily slapped him on the back to cheer him up.

A small smile formed on Dora’s lips as she watched them. “Don’t expect too much from me. I’m getting on in years,” she said.

After she was done visiting with her daughter and husband, Dora left the hospital and strode toward the Combat Clergy Corps’ base of operations. Her expression was now dead serious, a complete one-eighty from the one she’d shown in front of her family.

War, huh?

Twenty-five years later, she could still remember it well. Many had died and many more had shed tears for them. That was just the nature of war and conflict; this time would be no different. Soldiers deployed to protect the kingdom would die and their mothers would grieve for them. The same would happen to her daughter, Sheila, and the new life she was about to bring into the world. Countless lives brought forth in hope and joy would become shrouded in death and sorrow.

As the one who was responsible for the entire kingdom, the notion was unbearable to her. The least she wished for was for her people not

to suffer. She made up her mind to ensure that much.

“My oh my. Ever the idealist, my dear Saint.” Derek’s words during the hero meeting echoed in her mind once again.

I’m sorry, Derek, but I’m technically a woman of the cloth. I have to spout a few ideals from time to time.

When she arrived at the base of operations, the newly recruited soldiers were receiving their equipment.

“Oh, Commander Dora.” A high-ranked officer of the Combat Clergy Corps noticed her enter and saluted. “We have fallen a little behind on combat preparations, but we’re making steady progress. The new civilian recruits are relatively high in morale thanks to the popularity of you and His Majesty Maurice,” the officer reported.

“There’s something I want to discuss about that,” Dora said.

“Yes, what is it?”

“I’d like to change our strategy a little.”

“Survival of the fittest” reigned supreme in the underworld; the ones born strong made the rules. This extreme meritocracy naturally fostered extreme individualism. Most demons acted alone. Despite that, there *were* groups in the underworld, divided mainly into two: the Nobles and the Outlaws.

The Nobles settled down in specific locations, such as castles or dungeons, and lived lives of strict hierarchy and order within. The demon lord’s castle Beelzebub lived in was an archetypal example of this.

On the other hand, the Outlaws weren’t bound by location or social class. Instead, a band of demons would gather under one powerful boss. In principle, they weren’t much different from demons who acted alone, and they were usually free to go wild as they pleased. Thus, the Outlaws weren’t as numerous or organized as the Nobles.

But there was one demented Outlaw group that struck fear into the hearts of every Noble: the Hell Dragons. They rode on grand wyverns—insatiable carnivorous monsters that ran at extreme speeds—and raised havoc the underworld over. Among the Outlaws, they were the most destructive hedonists.

Loud, unhinged laughter filled the air as the reptilian Hell Dragons rode their large wyverns across the human world’s desert. They had hoisted a crucified, dying human as a decoration and had gorged themselves on the food they had stolen. Some were still ravaging women they’d kidnapped while gripping the reins of their wyverns. Even the wyverns were satisfied from feasting on human corpses. The lot of them were having the time of their lives.

Of course, the humans and food had come from the now-ruined Necropolis. Despite its status as a large, vibrant, and prosperous autonomous city, it had been razed to the ground in a matter of hours.

“Man, what a letdown. Those humans were a bunch of wimps.”

“But they had good grub and tight women!”

“Mwa ha ha! You got that right!”

The Hell Dragons cackled without a shred of remorse. Their boss, Georgios, had a very simple creed: “Just destroy and plunder. To enjoy ourselves.” They took those straightforward instructions to heart and carried them out with reckless abandon.

One of the demons pointed straight ahead. “There it is! I see our main dish!”

In the distance rose a gray castle, encircled by towering walls, standing alone in the middle of the desert—Asch Sanctuary.

“Ha ha ha! That’s a big-ass cake! It’ll make for a nice meal!” one demon said.

“Hell yeah, let’s goooo!” said another.

“Onwaaaaard!” the Hell Dragons cried in unison. They whipped their grand wyverns’ backs with their tails to make them accelerate.

The underworld’s ruffians reached their evil claws toward the holy land where humanity’s god had once alighted on the world.

“Now let’s see, how many soldiers do they have here?” one of the Hell Dragons’ officers muttered as he peered at Asch Sanctuary. In terms of putting up a fight, Necropolis had been an utter disappointment. This one should have some better military strength in place, or so he thought.

“What?! Hold on, everyone stop!” he told the rest of the Hell Dragons.

The demons pulled on the reins all at once and brought their wyverns to a halt.

“What’s wrong?” Georgios asked from the very back of the group.

“Well... There’s no one there, boss.”

“What do you mean ‘no one’?”

“Not a single soul!” The other demons searched the horizon and saw that he was right. Not even one soldier was visible, despite their proximity to the Second Kingdom.

“The hell’s going on?”

“Did they abandon their kingdom and make a run for it?”

The Hell Dragons stared, bewildered.

“You guys are all morons. Take a closer look.” Georgios pointed at a sandstorm up ahead. Inside of it, a humanoid silhouette was just barely visible—and the shadow was walking toward them.

“Goodness, what a large, raucous group. The noise is unbearable.”

“Just one?!”

The Hell Dragons were shocked yet again. Why in the world was a lone human strolling up to them?

“Come to think of it, Alan once told me, ‘You do everything by yourself and don’t leave room for the next generation to grow,’ didn’t he?”

It became clear that the person walking toward them was a muscular woman, over two meters tall, dressed in a black nun’s habit and wielding a halberd even larger than herself.

“And he’s exactly right. It’s a regrettable trait of mine.” The woman stopped, then spoke again in a loud, deep voice. “I’m Dora Alexandra, commander general of the Combat Clergy Corps of this kingdom. I won’t let you kill a single one of my people!”

Dora lifted her gargantuan halberd as if it were light as a feather and swung it horizontally toward the ground in front of her. A shock wave erupted, forming a straight line in the sand.

“Those of you who want to be taken to the Lord’s side, cross this line.” Dora rested her halberd on her shoulder and stood in the way of over two hundred grand wyverns, entirely on her own. The demons were momentarily left in awe at her grand display of confidence.



“Don’t look down on us!” One of the demons spurred his grand wyvern to action and charged at Dora.

While she was tall for a human, she was obviously nowhere near the size of a wyvern that was as large as a building. However, since they were so big, these wyverns inevitably lacked maneuverability; Dora had a chance to dodge and counterattack like a normal person would in her situation. Yet she didn’t show any sign of movement. In fact, she had her eyes closed.

“Ha ha ha, that bitch is dead!” an officer crowed.

Around the same time, King Maurice was fretting from within the Asch Sanctuary walls.

“Will Dora really be okay doing this alone?” he asked his bodyguard.

“Well, *you* know her. She won’t take no for an answer once she says she’ll do something,” the veteran soldier said. He thought back to the conversation he’d had with Dora a little earlier.

“The people are feeling uneasy. You should handle internal defense and give them a little peace of mind,” Dora had said to the crowd of officers and soldiers gathered at the base of operations.

“A-As you command. But, then, who will intercept the enemy outside?” one soldier had asked.

“I’ll handle it alone.”

Everyone present had been so shocked they didn’t know what to say. Dora was the queen, the commander general—the highest military rank—and one of the Seven Heroes who’d put an end to the Titanomachy. There was no one there who could have raised an objection to her fierce determination.

As usual, she’s being reckless.

The veteran soldier had a small smile on his face. He looked at the worried king in front of him and said, “There’s no cause for concern, Your Majesty. You should know that better than anyone.” Every single person in this kingdom knew. “If Commander Dora says she’ll do something, it will happen.”

“Drop dead, you insect!” shouted the Hell Dragon charging at Dora on his grand wyvern.

When the enormous monster was finally right before her, Dora’s

eyes shot wide open. She raised her halberd overhead, and the muscles in her thick arms rippled and bulged.

A flash of light.

Accompanied by a clamorous roar that hideously combined the sound of severing and crushing, Dora's single blow split the grand wyvern, along with its rider, right in half. The left and right halves of the grand wyvern's giant body collapsed on the ground, raising two large clouds of sand. A fountain of blood sprayed around it like some kind of blessed rain.

"Wh-What the..." The other Hell Dragons didn't know what to say after witnessing such a feat of strength.

"Amen." Dora rested her halberd on her shoulder once more and crossed herself with her free left hand.

"Well, well..." Georgios had a pleasant smile on his face after watching that.

"A-Attack her all at once! There's only one enemy! Overwhelm and crush her!"

Following the officer's order, the Hell Dragons charged at Dora on their grand wyverns. A stampede of over two hundred gigantic monsters rushed for the same solitary human, one after the other. These wyverns could smash turrets underfoot, pulverize defensive walls with a tail swing, and chomp on a dozen humans at once with their wide jaws. Calling the onslaught a numerical disadvantage for Dora would be a gross understatement.

"Haaaaaaaaaah!!!"

With a hearty battle cry, she swung her halberd straight at the assaulting enemies. It was almost as if there was a tornado around her as she sliced through several wyverns and their riders with each swing, sending their corpses flying into the distance. True to her moniker, Dora Alexandra the Godfist Saint boasted unparalleled superhuman strength. The Hell Dragons underestimated her at first, but they eventually came to realize that she was serious about protecting her entire kingdom alone. Not one enemy could cross the line Dora had carved in the sand.

"Sh-She's a monster..." One of the demons dismounted from his wyvern and ran up to Georgios. "Boss! We can't beat a monster like that!"

"Is that so?" Georgios stood up from his sofa and grabbed the demon's head.

The demon gasped. "Huh?"

Georgios crushed the demon's head with little effort. His brains splattered in a grand display of gore, much like water splashing out of

a popped water balloon. His corpse hit the ground the next moment like a forgotten toy.

"I don't need any wusses among my men," Georgios said with a wicked grin. The Hell Dragons stared at their leader and gulped.

Georgios gestured at a nearby demon. "Hey, you. Tell me the Hell Dragons' creed!"

"E-Everything exists for us to enjoy ourselves," the demon replied in a quivering voice.

"You're goddamn right. It's all about living in the moment and enjoying yourself while destroying and plundering everything you want." Georgios grabbed that demon's head just as he'd done with the last one. "I don't care about stuff that needs you to use your brain, like worrying if the enemy is strong or not, get it?"

"Y-Yes, sir."

The demons were reminded of an important fact. As monstrous as the woman in front of them was, their boss was a far more brutal and atrocious fiend.

"That said, having you fight that woman is a waste of time." Georgios let go of the demon.

"Ack!" The terror gripping the demon's heart had left him unable to stand properly, so he fell on his back.

"Stop fighting this instant," Georgios ordered his men. "I'll go myself."

He jumped down from his grand wyvern—a considerable drop—but made no effort to distribute the force of his landing, so a mushroom cloud of dust was raised when he hit the ground. He emerged unscathed and began prowling forward with the face of a carnivore honing in on its prey.

A shenmo, most powerful of the demon classes, was about to demonstrate his strength.

"Hmm?"

Dora raised an eyebrow. She'd been tearing through the endless wave of wyverns assaulting her, when the Hell Dragons suddenly stopped their attacks and moved their mounts to clear a path.

At first, she questioned the cause of the change, but the answer soon presented itself in the form of a single demon walking through the path. He was almost as tall as her, with ruggedly honed muscles and a bone-chilling aura emphasized by his wicked face. While he was humanoid in appearance, the dragon scales armoring his body and dragon tail were proof of his demonic nature. A massive, dense haze of mana distorted the scenery around him.

"That's a shenmo, then?" Dora knew they were the highest class of

demon—monsters among monsters—but there had been only one besides the demon lord in the previous war, so it was her first time fighting one.

“I’m Georgios the Tyrant Dragon of the New Seven Black Stars. I feel like killing some time with you.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets and strutted over to Dora. “The hell? I knew you were some old hag, but looking at you up close, you’re ancient!”

“Judging a woman by youth alone shows your immaturity, boy.”

“So you know how to run your mouth. At least you’re not senile yet.”

The large body of a beheaded wyvern rolled over in front of Georgios as he was still approaching Dora. Even without its head, the monster was still the size of a house. With his hands still in his pockets, he pulled his right leg back slightly.

“Out of the way.”

He kicked the wyvern corpse toward Dora. It accelerated to a breakneck speed, and she was a little taken aback as she leaned her upper body to the side to dodge it. The wind whooshed loudly as the corpse passed by her, which was not the sound she expected from an object of that size. To her even greater surprise, the corpse soared past her for hundreds of meters, almost parallel to the ground, until it crashed into the Asch Sanctuary walls with enormous force.

Kabloooooow!

The impact shook the entire kingdom.

“Wh-What was that?!”

“An earthquake?!”

Everyone inside the walls went tense, from the king, to the soldiers, to the doctors assisting Dora’s daughter in childbirth. None of them imagined that the cause was a large object from hundreds of meters away, hitting the walls after being kicked aside like a pebble on the road.

“Well, well, looks like one of you has some backbone,” Dora said after scrutinizing the demon in front of her. He was *strong*. Of course, she had known that in theory, but now she had actual proof that he far surpassed the Black Star she’d defeated during the Titanomachy.

“Course I am. Everyone in this world except me is trash. That includes the morons behind me and you,” Georgios said, as if he was the personification of arrogance itself. “That’s why I’m gonna give you a handicap, hag.”

Georgios walked directly in front of Dora and stood tall, hands still in his pockets. “I’ll let you hit me once, however you like. Won’t even defend myself.”

Contrary to her aggressive fighting style, Dora was the type to always remain composed during combat, but she couldn’t help but

open her eyes wide in surprise.

“Is this some type of trap?” she asked.

“Don’t bother digging around your old, rusted brain. I’m invincible, so there wouldn’t be a hint of a fight between us if I didn’t give you a freebie.”

Dora listened to Georgios’s voice closely with her Fairy Sense.

True, I don’t hear any sign of him hiding something.

It was impossible to lie in front of Dora. Unless they’d received special training, people’s voices subtly differed from their normal voices when they lied. Moreover, there were hardly any beings who could control the change in their heartbeat when they lied. Isabella the Final Form Villainess of the Seven Heroes was the only one she knew.

If he was telling the truth, had Georgios gone mad? He had witnessed the monstrous strength Dora had displayed earlier. Regardless, since he was so kind as to offer her a free hit, she thought it would be rude to refuse.

“I can appreciate a generous man.” Dora raised her halberd and struck Georgios with all her might. The crashing boom of the impact spread across the entire desert.

Richard, drill instructor of Asch Sanctuary for forty years, had this to say when asked about training the Combat Clergy Corps:

“Yes, that’s right. You need physical strength too, not just magic, in order to fight as a Holy Knight.” Richard stood on a rocky mountain near Asch Sanctuary. The mountain range—a vast, craggy wall that spanned three kilometers—was a sight to behold.

“Boulder smashing is a primitive training method. All you gotta do is smash the boulders in this area with your weapon. Of course, your own hand’ll be what breaks at first.” Richard tapped a nearby boulder with the back of his hand. As expected, he didn’t leave a mark on it.

“But as the training continues, you slowly become able to withstand hitting even these hard boulders, and by the end of it, you can smash small boulders.” Richard gestured at a pile of stones.

“Hmm? You want to know if Her Majesty Dora did this training too?” Richard laughed heartily. “Of course! You can actually still see the boulder she split during her training.”

He turned around and pointed at an enormous crater with a radius of around thirty meters on the mountain behind him. “Blows your mind that a sixteen-year-old girl did that, right? Her Majesty is the strongest member of the Combat Clergy Corps in the entire history of Asch Sanctuary. That, I guarantee.”

Dora's strike raised a cloud of sand that felt like it reached the sky. Even detonating a mass of bombs at once wouldn't lead to such a grand spectacle. This result was only possible thanks to her almost inhuman strength. Once the sand cleared, a massive crater, similar in scale to the one she'd once created in the mountains during her training, was hollowed into the ground where she had struck.

"See? Just like I told you."

Dora jolted.

Despite the power behind her attack, Georgios was completely unscathed. Dora's halberd had struck him at the crux of his right shoulder and neck with enough force to split a mountain, yet he didn't have a scratch. Not even a single drop of blood.

The Tyrant Dragon wore a ferocious grin on his face. "I'm invincible and everyone else is trash."

"Bwa ha ha! Master Georgios is the greatest!" shouted a Hell Dragon officer.

"An Ex-Skill, is it?" Dora muttered, her halberd still on Georgios's shoulder.

Ex-Skills were abilities possessed only by demons at the level of shenmo. They were fundamentally no different from the Unique Skills possessed by humans, such as Derek's brainwashing magic, Alan's mana of light, or Dora's Fairy Sense. The major distinction between the two was that Ex-Skills were powerful to an *exploitative* degree, hence the name.

Georgios had one of his own:

"Dragon scales," he said. Even with a halberd's blade pressed firmly against his neck, Georgios didn't remove his hands from his pockets. "My entire body is tougher than orichalcum, the hardest material in existence."

Dora's eyes shot wide open. If what Georgios claimed was true, the implications would be dire.

"I'm indestructible. Be it my neck, throat, even my damn eyeballs, they're the hardest things in this world." In other words, his body was an impregnable fortress, and his ability did the name Ex-Skill justice. He then casually removed his right hand from his pocket and raised his arm overhead. "Not to mention, I'm the strongest physical fighter in the New Seven Black Stars."

Dora started and immediately hoisted her halberd above her, just in time for Georgios to swing his arm down. The ensuing sound wave was accompanied by an even larger cloud of sand than the one caused

by Dora earlier.

“Ha ha ha ha! I’ll give you credit for not dropping dead in one hit, crone!”

Once the dust cleared, Dora was still there, breathing heavily. She’d somehow blocked Georgios’s attack with her halberd, but the impact had left her arms and legs bleeding. A single one-handed blow was all it took to reduce Dora—the woman who was unrivaled in terms of physical strength during the Titanomachy—to such a state.

Their levels were worlds apart. Dora had to completely rethink her approach. The enemies Dora had fought in the past combined, including the Black Star she’d defeated, couldn’t hold a candle to Georgios; his strength was an order of magnitude higher. This was the strength of a shenmo, of a New Black Star. They were the strongest forces in all of the underworld, gathered by Demon Lord Beelzebub himself.

You mean to tell me there are six more like him this time? Dora thought.

“Take that!” Georgios delivered a lazy front kick. Dora used her halberd to defend with catlike reflexes, but her entire body was pushed back by the intense force.

“Urgh!” She managed to brace both her legs and hold out, but her body wouldn’t stop moving backward no matter how much time passed. She’d moved close to one hundred meters from her original position when she finally managed to kill her momentum.

“Ha ha ha! Still, that’s a nice weapon you’ve got there. It’s made of orichalcum, right?” Georgios called as he approached Dora. He was right; her halberd was crafted from eighty-five percent orichalcum. It was one of a kind, among the masterpieces of Silver Factory, the Seventh Kingdom. If it weren’t such a fine weapon, it would have snapped in half after enduring an attack of that magnitude.

“Not that it makes any difference. My body is still tougher!” Georgios rushed forward to close the distance and started his fierce assault against Dora.

Chapter 6: Godfist Saint versus Tyrant Dragon 2

“Hmph. You still act however you like, Tyrant Dragon,” Beelzebub said to himself. As Dora and Georgios were fighting, he was in the hall of the demon lord’s castle. The dimension-stabilizing procedure necessary for the use of the Character Gate relied on his mana as a catalyst. As a result, he could monitor the actions of any of the New Seven Black Stars he’d sent over, no matter where they went.

“My goodness, he’s certainly an impatient fellow,” said a man in a butler’s outfit behind Beelzebub. He was one of the New Seven Black Stars, the God of Games.

Beelzebub turned around and saw the remaining five shenmo gathered in the hall. “Then let us depart too,” he said. A large, black distortion in space appeared before him. It was time for the six stars of despair to step into the human world once more.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!!” Georgios’s harsh laughter shook the air itself. His onslaught of unarmed attacks rained down on Dora. Right hooks, left backfists, front kicks, roundhouse kicks—the variety was endless.

She grunted in pain. Each blow was as devastating as an attack from a powerful weapon, and every strike left a large crater in its wake, while the shock waves raised sprays of sand.

“Here’s some more!”

Whether she blocked with the blade of her weapon or not, he attacked relentlessly. Anyone else’s hand would be severed if they tried that, but he could slam his fists directly against the blade without a care in the world. She was blown away, weapon and all, while he was unharmed. In fact, she was the one who had to worry about damage to her weapon.

The blade...seems to be fine. The Seventh Kingdom’s masterpiece lives up to its name. This was the first time she had to worry about wear and tear while using an orichalcum weapon.

“Don’t you think you should be more worried about yourself than the weapon?” He closed the gap between them in a flash.

Stoutness and strength aren’t the only things he excels at. His speed

was considerable too.

This time, he went for a left hook. As the attack reached her, she took a deep breath and focused her strength into the hand holding her halberd, masterfully deflecting the attack.

He raised an eyebrow in surprise. She might have been a fighter who relied on brute strength, but her long combat experience had carved superb combat skills into her muscles too. She wasn't at the same tactical level as Alan or Kevin, but a deflection like this was well within her power. After knocking his fist to the side and leaving him fully open, she counterattacked with her halberd.

However, what her hand felt wasn't just resistance, but the pain of recoiling after hitting something too hard.

"It won't work." He had a wide grin on his face.

However, she didn't let up. With a sharp battle cry, she swung her halberd at him a second, then a third time. She put her entire strength into the fourth swing, even utilizing rotational force. The blow was strong enough to create a deafening clang around them, but the result was the same.

"Told you it won't work." Georgios was unharmed, as pristine as a brand-new cooking pot.

"You're a real cockroach, you know that?"

"It's time to take you out, trash."

His one-sided onslaught began once more. He punched, kneed, kicked, and elbowed, followed by another punch, elbow, knee, kick, kick, kick, punch, knee, elbow, fist, fist, kick—with no end in sight. Anyone but Dora would have been reduced to a bloody pulp in a fraction of a second.

He laughed amidst his storm of violence. "Plunder, plunder, destroy, destroy! The more valuable it is to someone, the better. When you plunder and destroy everything they hold dear, you'll be filled with an incredible sense of superiority. There's no pleasure like it in this world."

That was the sole reason he'd agreed to participate in the war. He felt like sacking the human world, all for the sake of his own entertainment.

How troubling that a man with no morals happened to be born with such strength, Dora thought.

That was the heart of Georgios the Tyrant Dragon. Guys like him were a major nuisance for anyone wishing for peace.

"The people you hold dear are in that kingdom, aren't they?!" he told Dora, who was barely defending against him. "I can't wait for the moment I tear them to shreds! What will their faces look like when I break their bones? How will they scream and cry when I rape them? Just imagining it gives me that rush!"

When he was done, Dora's face twitched.

Meanwhile, in the hospital inside the walls, Dora's daughter Sheila had just gone into labor.

"Now of all times..." the doctor muttered in discontent.

"Just relax and take deep breaths!" A nurse was holding Sheila's hand tight as she instructed her.

"Phew! Phew!" Sheila strained herself to bring forth a new life to this world.

"Keep going, Your Highness! Her Majesty Dora is also fighting right now!" The doctor did his best to encourage Sheila.

"You'll do all that, will you?" Dora murmured while weathering the storm of Georgios's attacks. The monster standing before her had declared that he would walk over her corpse and go on to destroy everything she held dear in the kingdom behind her.

Her daughter, her husband, her motherland, her people, the new lives about to be born...

"Then I can't afford to fall here." Her muscles surged under her nun's habit. "Haah!"

He noticed but never slowed, until she intercepted his fist with her halberd head-on.

Claaaaang!

The sound of two metal objects colliding with each other at high speed vibrated around them. The powerful clash even scattered shock waves in the area.

"Graaah!" The Hell Dragons watching their fight from a distance were about to be blown away.

Dora firmly gripped her halberd with both hands this time. "No more petty tricks from me. Fight strength with strength, head-to-head. I'll take you down."

Dora, who had witnessed Georgios's strength and was trying to defend against his attacks up to that point, completely reversed her strategy.

"Haaaaaaaah!!!"

Fight strength with strength, she had said, so she faced Georgios's barrage of fierce attacks by striking back with her own weapon.

She'd been on the back foot only moments ago, but the fight was

gradually moving to more equal terms. The difference was in her determination. She redirected all of the focus and strength she had used on defense and evasion into offense. That was where the Godfist Saint's peerless physical strength shone. She had no choice but to accept that her enemy was strong, probably even stronger than her in terms of power. That was why she was making the most out of her strong suit: her muscles. Straightforward as her body was, it responded perfectly to a fight for her life.

"Say, uh, that human ain't half bad, is she? She's actually trading blows with the boss." The Hell Dragons were so amazed they couldn't help but stand and watch the fight. They had thought about providing backup for their boss at first, but quickly realized it was impossible. They would be torn apart the moment they stepped close to the two of them.

"Haah!" Dora put her whole strength behind one of her attacks, which Georgios blocked with his bare hands, but that wasn't the end of it. Following a hearty war cry, she strained her large arms further, to the point where her blood vessels pulsed visibly under her skin.

He was taken aback at the tremendous brute strength that had repelled him. "You damn hag!" he said with a click of his tongue.

Damn you, woman. How are you actually equal to me in terms of brute strength?

Begrudgingly, he was forced to reevaluate his assessment of her. Despite him clearly outclassing her, she was turning their battle into an even fight. He'd never met anyone else with such monstrous brawn, even in the underworld.

She took advantage of his pause and struck him again.

"You're wasting your effort," he said. No matter how tenacious she was, it would amount to nothing, because he was invincible. His body was the hardest substance in the entire world. "Harming me is —"

"No, I can already hear it," she said. With that, she slammed her halberd into Georgios again.

"What...the hell?!" For the first time during their fight, he was shocked. Somehow, Dora's halberd had dug into his skin.

She took a deep breath. "No matter how tough something is, it has a weakness, whether it comes to the angle or how you hit it," she said, then pointed at her ear. "I heard it loud and clear."

Dora's Unique Skill, Fairy Sense, allowed her to hear the sound her weapon and Georgios's body made when they clashed in exquisite detail, enough that she could deduce exactly how to attack to crack into it.

"I've gotten the hang of breaking you. You're not so invincible after all. Have you gotten over that silly presumption of yours that

everyone besides you is trash, even a little?”

In all likelihood, this was the first time Georgios had been injured. He didn't respond to Dora as he looked at the wound on his body for a moment, before turning to his underlings.

“Hey, you! Bring the thing over!” he ordered.

Several Hell Dragons scurried to bring the requested item to him: a two-meter-long black club, nicknamed Dragon Tail. It was his personal weapon, forged from orichalcum and reinforced with his own scales. While orichalcum was sturdy, it was also extraordinarily heavy. Dora was the only human who could properly wield her halberd, yet Georgios's club was even heavier. Nevertheless, he smoothly lifted Dragon Tail with one hand.

“You better appreciate this, woman. I'm gonna crush you with more effort than the usual bugs.” Georgios held Dragon Tail aloft, then swung it at Dora. She tried to intercept it as she'd done so far, but the impact was so heavy she and her halberd were thrown back.

That was nothing like the previous strikes! Dora was experienced enough to recognize the shift. This demon's actual fighting style was one that utilized a weapon, not just his bare fists.

“Bwa ha ha!” Georgios nonchalantly wielded Dragon Tail like it was a short spear. “You wanted to know if I'd 'gotten over my silly presumption,' didn't you? To which I say, shut it, you pile of garbage! I'm the one who plunders! I'm the one who destroys! I'll always be invincible!”

Georgios the Tyrant Dragon was born in the Valley of Death, the hardest place to survive in the underworld, yet he had no equals even there. He was tremendously strong and sturdy, to the point of invulnerability. His body was encased in the hardest substance in the world, while his physical strength was enough to shatter any adversary. As a child, he killed anyone he didn't like and won every fight he was challenged to; he destroyed and plundered to his heart's content, deriving great pleasure from trampling down everything in his path.

When he was only nine years old, Georgios attacked a Noble community for the first time. It was an unusual one for the underworld, because the residents worshiped a god like the humans did. Their worship did little to save them—he single-handedly annihilated the community.

“Your savage actions will one day bring divine punishment upon you!” the leader of the community told Georgios.

In return, Georgios stepped on the boss's head and smashed it to pieces, then spat on the statue of the community's god.

“Punish me if you can, moron!” he shouted.

Ever since then, Georgios had performed even crueller acts of destruction and pillaging, almost as if trying to show off to that so-called god.

Ten years later, there was still no sign of any sort of divine punishment coming for him.

I'm invincible. I'm the one who takes whatever he wants, no one else. This world is nothing but a toy for me to play with until it breaks. I'll say it again: I'm invincible, now and forever.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!!”

Georgios wielded Dragon Tail with indescribable strength; the Tyrant Dragon was now going all out. The thick club easily weighed several tons, but his swift blows were accompanied by a whoosh of air that sounded as if he were swinging a twig around. His hits were clearly more destructive than Dora's, but she didn't take a single step back.

“Haah!”

Far from it—she rushed at him head-on. Her attacks may have paled in sheer destructiveness compared to his, but retreating would only end with her getting swallowed up by his onslaught. Now that her attacks could damage Georgios, she struck back even under the constant rain of blows, all the while looking for an opportunity for her attack to connect.

The two of them clashed relentlessly against each other, weapons in hand. As for who gave in first... That would be the demons around them. Georgios and Dora both possessed monstrous strength beyond mortal understanding. What would happen if these two unstoppable forces were to collide? It didn't take much thought to figure out.

“Whoaaaaaaa!”

“I'm gonna get blown away! Hold on to your wyverns!”

The shock waves generated by their skirmish battered the surrounding area like a raging storm. Every demon of the Hell Dragons had to hold on for dear life to avoid getting blown off. The damage extended beyond them, to the defensive walls of the Second Kingdom, which creaked under the intense wind pressure, almost as if they were screaming for their lives. This grand battle, a full-out brawl between one of the Seven Heroes and one of the New Seven Black Stars, neither yielding an inch, was enough to wreck their surroundings through aftereffects alone.

Worthy of note in that outrageous fight was Dora's magnificent combat intuition. While Georgios could still beat her in terms of

power, and she would lose if he forced her into a corner, she stayed on even ground with him by understanding how and when to properly apply her strength. This was the result of the experience she'd cultivated in all her long years of combat.

Unfortunately, the time it took to gather that experience had taken something in return: her youth. As the battle stretched on, she started breathing heavily.

"Come on, don't slack off on me now! Worn out already?" he said. He didn't let up in the slightest.

Tsk! If only I was twenty years younger. She was forty-six years old, past her body's prime. She could maintain her muscles to a certain extent through daily training and combat, but she was aware that her stamina was considerably lower than it had been in her youth. Compared to her, he was young, not to mention a demon, a race that had no concept of growing old. If the fight dragged on, a gap would inevitably form between them.

Georgios slowly pushed Dora back until her halberd was forcibly knocked aside and she was thrown off-balance.

Dammit! The opening created was a grave one.

"Goodbye, trash." He slammed Dragon Tail directly into her guts.

"Argh!" An unnatural sound came from her body as countless bones and muscles were smashed to bits inside her. She was knocked away with tremendous momentum. After she landed, she rolled onward, only stopping when she bumped into the Second Kingdom's walls.

"Not good..." she said with blood spilling like a crushed fruit from her mouth. A wound like that had to be fatal. Just one hit had torn her bones, muscles, and internal organs apart; her condition was serious. To survive, she needed to be brought to a hospital posthaste and have several magicians treat her with healing magic.

"Still in one piece after a direct hit, huh? You deserve some praise, hag." Georgios rested Dragon Tail on his shoulder as he slowly walked over to Dora.

The kingdom she was meant to protect was right behind her; she *had* to get up. She placed her hands on the wall and somehow brought herself to her feet.

"Urk!"

She coughed as a torrent of blood spilled from her mouth and dropped back to her knees. A fatal wound was nothing she could just walk off. Even standing up once was a terrific display of willpower. But, to face the facts, that had to be her limit. Her major injuries prevented her from even standing up, while her foe was full of stamina and barely scratched. The situation was hopeless.

He walked up to her to deliver the coup de grâce. Another blow

from Dragon Tail would be her last. The final chapter of the hero Dora Alexandra's life would end with her total defeat.

Unless...

"Do your best, Your Majesty!!!"

Countless voices shouted from behind her.

Dora turned her head around at the sudden cheering. The voices came from above her. To her surprise, a crowd of soldiers and citizens had appeared at the top of the walls, practically covering them end to end.

Dora panicked at the sight of them. "You fools! Didn't I tell you to stay inside the walls because I'll handle this myself?!" Even approaching her fight with Georgios would put them at risk of the shock waves' effects.

"I don't think we can do that, even if you're the one asking, Dora." Dora's husband—King Maurice of the Second Kingdom—stepped forward from within the crowd.

"You..." Dora was at a loss for words.

"Eh heh heh! Sheila told me, 'Stop wasting your time here, go cheer on mommy,' and kicked me out of the hospital," Maurice said while rubbing the back of his head sheepishly.

Dora looked at him, stunned.

"I respect your decision to fight alone in order to make sure none of our citizens die. That's why I'd like you to respect our desire to cheer you on. So..." Maurice took a deep breath, then shouted, "Do your best, Dora!"

Following the king's voice, the citizens also cheered as one.

"We believe in your victory, Your Majesty!" The women offered a prayer for her.

"Show us the strength of the Mother of our Second Kingdom!" The men sent her words of trust.

"Don't lose to some lousy demon!" The little children shouted with all their might for her.

"Aah..." Their resounding voices spread their feelings across Dora's body. A tiny smile crossed her face. "You're all such silly children."

She turned to face Georgios once more, eyes brimming with determination. This time, she firmly planted her feet and stood with a war cry. Her injuries screamed back at her to stop, but she was undeterred. Her heart was full of gratitude for everyone's support, leaving no room for pain or anything else.

"Well, look who's finally up," Georgios said in surprise. "Not that it changes anything."

He was right. It was remarkable that she could even stand in her condition, but her depleted stamina and fatal injury didn't magically disappear. Compared to her, he was in tip-top shape; there was no point in a direct confrontation with him.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!!"

Even so, she screamed and brought down her halberd on him. He reacted quickly and tried to repel the attack with Dragon Tail, but it was *his* weapon that bounced back from the clash.

"What?!" Georgios was astonished. Somehow, Dora's attack was heavier than the ones before she was gravely injured. "What the hell're you playing at?"

"This is what we call hysterical strength," Dora said with a smile, blood still spilling like red wine from her mouth. She stood in Georgios's way while her people cheered her on. "If you came here to wield your power to plunder, then I'm here to wield the power to protect!"

Dora Almard—now known as Dora Alexandra—always had a large physique and great physical strength despite being a girl. As a child, she'd often been bullied with nicknames like "gorilla woman." There'd been a time when she wondered why she was so large for a girl.

That had changed when she was thirteen years old, after she enrolled in the Combat Clergy Corps. Her great strength had helped her quickly distinguish herself as a warrior. With her superhuman natural strength and robust body, no man, woman, or even monster could stand up to her. She soon found herself comfortable there. No one could make fun of her in the world of the military.

Thus, she'd trained her strength to greater heights and became unrivaled in combat. In recognition of her formidable military achievements, she had been promoted to a commanding officer at a young age. Eventually, her strength had played a pivotal role in the Titanomachy when she defeated one of the Seven Black Stars and led humanity to peace alongside the other six heroes.

After Dora had returned from the war, there wasn't a person left who'd make light of her. Everyone looked at her with respect. The girl who'd been teased for her large body had become known as a hero the world over. But even a hero of Dora's caliber—or precisely *because* she was a hero—had her own worries.

In Asch Sanctuary, women were typically married with a child or two by the time they were twenty, but Dora had been still single at thirty years old before she even noticed. She'd simply thought that was how things were meant to be. She'd known she was a bulky woman with no charm, and she was busy exterminating monsters as

part of the Combat Clergy Corps even after the war was over. Her life had seemed fine by her, so she'd fought and fought, proving her strength many times. The military had been who she was and where she belonged, until one day changed everything.

"P-Please marry me!" Prince Maurice—sixteen years old at the time—had proposed to her. Receiving a proposal from the next king had made Dora wonder if this was some kind of romantic opera.

"But, you're the prince. I'm sure you can pick a much younger, charming, and gracious wife. What would you want with a giant woman like me?" she'd replied.

The prince had shaken his head. "Don't say that! I find you the most attractive and wonderful woman in the kingdom!"

"Oh my, really?"

Dora hadn't been sure how to act. It was the first time she'd been approached so fervently.

In the end, she had no reason to turn Maurice down, so she'd accepted his proposal. She thought it might be for the best to have a partner; no one ever knows what the future holds. The prince had been flimsy, yes, but he'd also been kind and diligent. On their wedding day, the plaza in front of the palace was filled with citizens there to give their blessing.

A year later, Dora had given birth to a girl. She'd always thought she was fated to never have children of her own.

"You did it, Dora!" Her husband had embraced his newborn daughter with joy, while the baby had flapped her tiny arms and legs around in his arms. The people outside the hospital had cheered for her when they'd learned she had given birth.

Oh, I get it now. Dora had come to a realization. *My large body was meant for me to protect them—all of them.*

That was the first time Dora Alexandra had truly felt glad she'd been born with a big, strong body.

How could I forget! The duty carved deep into Dora's heart filled her weakened body with vigor. Unlike before, her attacks wouldn't be knocked aside by Georgios's Dragon Tail.

"I have people I've sworn to protect! The weight of all I'm carrying is in my every strike!" Her broken organs and torn muscles creaked with every blow. She was on the verge of losing consciousness and dropping her weapon, but every time she got close...

"Do your best, Your Majesty!"

Someone's voice renewed her strength. Though she was someone who'd once only ever thought about getting stronger, fighting, and defeating her enemies, her people had given her a true place to

belong. Now, their voices brought her fading consciousness back from the brink and offered her broken body endless strength.

Watch and learn, wicked Tyrant Dragon. That is the strength of a human fighting for the sake of someone else.

“Oooooooooooooohhh!!!”

Dora channeled her willpower and feelings and brought down her halberd on Georgios.

Georgios clicked his tongue in frustration. From his perspective, this situation was utterly incomprehensible. Not only had his worn out and decrepit enemy made a sudden recovery, but her attacks had become heavier than before. Why would her strength surge just because people were cheering her on? These feeble creatures called humans were a true mystery. Demons, who were individualists and lived in a world of merciless meritocracy be they Nobles or Outlaws, found humans almost inscrutable. That went double for someone like Georgios who viewed everyone besides him as nothing more than worms.

“Enough is enough, you piece of trash!” He swung Dragon Tail in frustration.

Dora spun on the spot to give herself as much centrifugal force as possible, and countered with her halberd.

Crack!

A dull sound resounded.

“What...the hell?” Georgios looked incredulously at his weapon. His favorite and most trustworthy Dragon Tail had been ruined? Inconceivable! It was made of one hundred percent pure orichalcum, and had been further reinforced with his own scales!

“I already told you: *everything* can be broken.” Dora raised her bloodied lips in a smirk. It was the same as when she’d injured Georgios despite his dragon scales. She had listened closely to the sound of impacts with Fairy Sense, figured out the most efficient way to break Dragon Tail, then gradually accumulated damage on it through their exchanged blows. The fact that it had taken so long for it to break was a testament to how durable a weapon it’d been, but everything had its limit.

“You damn witch!” He tossed the broken Dragon Tail aside and lunged at Dora, who swung her halberd in retaliation.

“Haah!” Her weapon slammed against his torso as if to get payback for earlier.

“Agh!” This time, he groaned in pain. This was his first serious damage in the fight. In fact, it might have been his first time getting wounded *in his life*.

Dora didn't pass up the huge opening she'd created. This time, Georgios was the one on the receiving end of a fierce offensive.

There was no other way to describe it; Georgios was being pummeled with a shower of blows. He took hits to his stomach, the top of the head, then his face, back, one of his shins, and his neck. The overwhelming advantage he had earlier turned into a distant dream as Dora repeatedly drove her halberd into his body.

Losing his weapon had turned the battle one-sided. His attacks didn't lack power, but his reach had become shorter. Dora's halberd was around two meters long. Unarmed, he couldn't get within reach when she was swinging such a massive weapon around. He had no reason to worry about distance at the start of the battle, thanks to the defense afforded to him by his dragon scales, but her attacks could injure him now.

Of course, there were martial arts that could compensate for the difference in reach between armed and unarmed fighters, but Georgios couldn't rely on something like that to save him. He'd never needed to acquire intricate skills like martial arts. Having outclassed other demons with his invincible body since birth, he'd beaten his opponents with raw strength and brutality, not finesse.

The ones who had made Dora's reversal possible were the people cheering her on from behind.

"Gooooo, Your Majestyyyyy!!!" they shouted in one voice.

"Haah!" Dora delivered yet another ferocious blow, eliciting cries of joy from the people every time. As their cheering continued, Dora's attacks grew sharper and stronger.

Shit, shit, shit! Georgios grew increasingly irritated. This was the first time in his life things weren't going his way. That was when Demon Lord Beelzebub's words surfaced in his mind.

"Don't underestimate their latent power. Crush them with your full strength and without a shred of mercy."

Was this the latent power Beelzebub was talking about? He thought it was nonsense.

"This is bullshiiiiit!" Georgios rushed in for a counterattack, but Dora was too skilled a fighter to allow such a reckless maneuver to connect. A loud thud echoed as her halberd hit him directly on his unguarded stomach.

"Grah!" The biggest impact yet rattled his entire body. His internal organs were rattled while every last bit of air was expelled from his lungs, until he was finally forced to his knees. Today was the first time in his life for all of these: getting injured, taking damage, and being brought to his knees. This naturally born monster had

known nothing of pain and defeat before.

“Damn it...all...” Georgios mumbled. Dora raised her halberd to finish him off, when a loud voice interrupted them.

“Stand up, boss!”

It was an officer of the Hell Dragons who was watching from atop his wyvern who had spoken up. He continued, “We all look up to you! You can’t lose to some stupid human!”

Following the officer’s words, the other members of the Hell Dragons also started cheering Georgios on.

“Yeah! Show us your usual unrivaled might!”

“You can kill that oversized crone with your eyes closed!”

Georgios was a man who only cared about pillaging and destroying everything in his path. He was not the type to be liked or thanked by people like Dora was. However, his peerless strength, arrogance, and self-centered attitude were an ideal for every ruffian out there. The Hell Dragons were the men most spellbound by him in the underworld. They wanted him to be his usual invincible and cruel self, to see the powerful, hard-core, and badass man they admired standing tall.

Georgios stood up as he shouted in response, “Shut the hell up, you morons, as if I would ever lose! I’m invincible!” He thrust his fist directly at Dora’s halberd.

Craaack!

This time, it was her weapon that broke apart, leaving her wide-eyed.

“How dare pieces of trash like you cheer *me* on? It pisses me off that you thought I’d lose for even a second. I’ll make you pay for it later!” Georgios told his men.

“Boss...” That rancorous attitude was the perfect example of the Tyrant Dragon they looked up to.

Unlike Dora, Georgios had no one to protect, and thanking them for their words of encouragement never crossed his mind. However, he did have his pride, which stemmed from his many declarations that he was the strongest in the world.

“I’m the strongest and everyone else is trash.”

His boundless ego and narcissism were what drove him to rise once more.

“Looks like your little weapon is gone now, trash.” Georgios sneered at Dora before bumping his fists together.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me,” she said before letting go of the halberd’s shaft. Then, she readied her fists as Georgios had.

With both their weapons gone, they had nothing to fight with but empty fists. For two fighters that relied on brute strength, there was only one thing to do after coming this far: a one-on-one, unarmed slugfest. No strategy or tricks, just a struggle of willpower and stamina.

Dora pulled her right fist as far as her body allowed, while Georgios stomped his left leg forcefully into the sand. They both punched each other in the face with explosive force.

The only things audible from the battlefield were the sounds of flesh striking flesh and the voices of people cheering both combatants on.

“Beat the hag to death, booooooss!!!” The vulgar yet vigorous voices of the Hell Dragons jolted the air.

“How’s that?” Georgios asked.

“Ugh!” Dora grunted. Each punch from Georgios’s rock-hard fists dealt terrible damage to her. It was all she could do to weather the blows.

“Don’t lose to him, Your Majestyyyyyy!!!” The heartwarming, piercing voices of her people powered her up again.

“Haah!”

“Grah!”

The unarmed Dora also threw punch after punch at Georgios, with enough precision to fracture his sturdy body.



The fistfight between two people with strength beyond comprehension would soon draw to a close. Both Dora and Georgios were the brawniest and the toughest of their respective groups. Dora punched, Georgios was punched, and vice versa, ad infinitum. They both used their full strength to try to destroy the other's body, even while their own was breaking apart. Blood splashed like rain on the sands of the desert, and the sound of bones breaking crackled like thunder in the air. They were both locked in battle without budging an inch.

“Urk...”

Dora was the first to lose strength, and her stance crumbled.

“Ha ha ha! I knew you'd wimp out eventually!” Georgios jeered, blood running down the side of his mouth.

Damn, of course my stamina failed me. She ground her teeth in frustration at her body that wouldn't move as she commanded. Of course, she'd already been exhausted earlier, and had even received an injury that would end her life. The strength she drew on thanks to her people's encouragement had dried up. Amidst heavy breaths, Dora's eyes turned empty and she staggered backward.

But, I still...have to protect them. The people dear to her, all those who believed in her and were currently cheering for her—she *had* to protect them. She attempted to find whatever strength she had left while picturing them, but her body refused to move. This time, she couldn't move a finger or even breathe properly.

“Goodbye, you filthy hag! How about you curse your god for being born a human who can grow old and frail on the way out? Now, die for me, so I can enjoy myself!”

Georgios raised his fist to deliver the mortal blow, but at that moment, Dora heard something with her Fairy Sense.

Waaah! Waaah!

They were the cries of a newborn baby.

“You did great! He's a healthy baby boy, Your Highness!” said the doctor in Sheila's delivery room.

Despite the exhaustion that came with childbirth, Sheila reached for her newborn's hands. “His hands are so tiny. So cute!”

Light returned to Dora's eyes.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!!!”

With a hearty roar, she thrust her fist right into his.

“What?!” He was shocked, to say the least; he’d thought that she’d actually reached her limit this time. Their two punches collided.

A crack ran across Georgios’s arm, spreading to the rest of his body. “No way... No waaaaaaaaaaaaayyy!!!”

Snaaaaap!

The Tyrant Dragon’s “invincible” body broke apart.

“No...fucking...way...” He collapsed face down on the ground. The crack had extended from his arm to his chest and entered his heart. Both humans and demons shared the same source of life and mana: their hearts. With this injury, the fight had been decided.

“I should have been...stronger than you... I’m...invincible...” he said between gasps. His arm shattered, then the majority of his chest. Soon enough, almost a third of his body had crumbled away.

Dora, covered in blood, her right arm completely crushed, looked down at Georgios. “That’s true. In terms of sheer strength, you were stronger than the me of today. But humans can bring out incredible strength when they’re protecting someone dear to them. And I wasn’t only protecting the people who came to cheer for me on those walls—I was also fighting to protect the lives they will bring to this world in the future. That’s the difference between me and *you*, someone who only fought for momentary pleasure.”

Protecting people also meant protecting the new lives connected to them. The baton of life had been passed down generation to generation from the first humans born long ago, and it would continue to be passed down to future generations. That was an unfamiliar concept to demons, who were mostly born through abiogenesis. Those demons who only fought for the present and themselves, they couldn’t understand the concept of fighting for the future of someone dear to you. When demons confronted humans who fought for much more, the disparity between the burden each side bore became clear. Humanity’s drive to protect the future and their people outweighed the difference between their base capabilities.

“If you want to defeat me, try finding even one person you want to protect after you’re reborn.” That was her friendly advice to him, as a send-off to the afterlife.

“Hah! Eat shit...you damn bitch.” In return, he flipped her off with his remaining arm, as arrogant and conceited as when she first met him. The Tyrant Dragon stuck to his Outlaw behavior until the bitter end, when he fragmented into dust and disappeared from the world.

That was how demons who’d lost their hearts, the source of mana, met their maker.

Dora heaved a sigh of equal parts exasperation and respect. “Full of spunk to the very end, huh? Can’t say I don’t appreciate that attitude.”

“Oh?” After the fight was over at last, an unusual scene unfolded before Dora Alexandra’s eyes. Every member of the Hell Dragons and their grand wyverns turned into black shadows and disappeared.

So, it’s the same.

She was familiar with this phenomenon. When Alan had defeated the demon lord during the Titanomachy, all of the demons had also been dragged back to the underworld. What was occurring in front of her was precisely what happened then.

“This might be a valuable piece of information.” Dora wanted to let Alan and the others know immediately through projection magic. But for now, it was okay to say that this fight had been won, right? The moment she thought that, she collapsed on the sand.

“Phew...”

Who could blame her? She was battered and bruised from head to toe. The fact she’d remained standing as long as she did was extraordinary.

“If I was asked to win another one, I don’t think I could do it.” Her victory was a miracle with a chance of one in ten, no, one in a *thousand* to happen. That was how powerful the New Seven Black Stars really were.

Soldiers descended the walls and rushed to her aid.

“Do your best, my beloved comrades in arms,” she mumbled as her wounds were being treated. The other heroes were sure to face harsh battles of their own soon enough.

Epilogue

In the First Kingdom, Whitehyde, many apprehensive soldiers stood in front of the royal palace. Most had never experienced war before, and now their first fight to the death against intelligent foes was approaching as quickly as a wolf catching the scent of blood. The anticipation of it made some collapse on the spot, while others cut formation and ran for it the moment they were left unattended.

“In the end, only half the people who gathered at the start remain. Isn’t that right, Master Alan?” Rosetta, dressed in her usual maid outfit, was there as a member of the medical team. Alan, clad in several pieces of defensive gear, stood next to her. He had been put in charge of security in front of the palace and was observing his men’s behavior.

“Well, it is what it is,” Alan said. His men were youths who’d lived their lives in a peaceful world, so he couldn’t really blame them. The current era was much healthier than the one he’d grown up in, where it was expected of men to fight and die for the sake of humanity. At least, even amongst those raised in a peaceful society, there were some who stayed to fight despite their fear. “The half who stayed behind are the ones I can rely on.”

They remind me of William. Although, I suspect he didn’t know what fear was in the first place. Alan cracked a small smile when he thought back to that cocky grin of William’s.

His thoughts were interrupted by a knight running to him, holding a piece of paper with a message from their allied kingdom. “A report has come in from the Second Kingdom! Dora Alexandra the Godfist Saint has defeated one of the New Seven Black Stars!”

Cheers of joy erupted among the knights. Everyone around Alan was celebrating their first victory, but he was focused on an interesting piece of information inside the report.

After she defeated the New Black Star, his underlings turned into black shadows and disappeared? Like Dora, Alan was familiar with this phenomenon. The same thing had happened when he’d defeated Beelzebub and destroyed his magic gate. Upon hearing it had happened once more, a theory began brewing in his mind.

“This is pure conjecture, but the teleportation magic the demons are using this time around may utilize the mana of a shenmo to create a dimensional gate,” Alan said.

In other words, with one shenmo defeated, the demons could appear in a maximum of six other locations. That was still a troubling reality, but to look on the bright side, it meant that all lower demons would be forcibly transported back to the underworld once the New Seven Black Stars were dealt with. There was a chance for this to end without any unnecessary sacrifices.

Additionally, the report mentioned that the Godfist Saint had fallen unconscious due to the severe injuries she'd sustained during the fight, and she was currently undergoing treatment.

"To think *Dora* would end up like this," Alan said. In the previous war, she'd valiantly won fight after fight with relative ease, but even she had struggled to win this time. That proved just how formidable the New Seven Black Stars were. The knights around Alan were in great spirits, praising the Seven Heroes and claiming that the demon army was nothing to fear, when they should have been realizing just what a powerful threat they were up against.

Suddenly, the space in front of them warped to reveal a lone man, right out of thin air. His majestic physique was chiseled like a marble sculpture, and his eyes burned with both refinement and cruelty. Like every shenmo, he only had small traces of the monster he was based on—in his case, the two horns on his head, and a hidden third eye.

"You humans are truly such mysterious creatures." It was none other than Demon Lord Beelzebub.



To call this development unexpected would be the understatement of the century. The leader of the enemy army had brazenly walked straight into the humans' headquarters, all on his own. In a simpler world, this would be a prime opportunity for them to charge him and take him down.

"Augh..."

The knights who had been celebrating the news of their victory moments before began to collapse one after the other as foam crawled from the edges of their mouths. Beelzebub hadn't attacked them; he was merely standing there. Regardless, his fearsome aura and the dense mana he emitted were more than the average person could withstand.

Beelzebub showed no disdain for the knights. He only regarded them with a curious expression, like a child watching an insect in a spider's web. "Despite your feeble natures, you sink your fangs into us demons before we realize it, even when we vastly surpass you in strength." He then addressed the only man present who could endure the demon lord's mana and intimidation, the man who stood tall as a sailboat among the sea of collapsed knights. "Mysterious creatures indeed. Wouldn't you agree, Alan Granger?"

"Beelzebub," Alan said in a low voice, his eyes boring into his old enemy.

Alan's location wasn't the only one enemies had appeared in.

In the Fifth Kingdom, Green Farm, the air above a flatland near the royal palace twisted in on itself. A small boy with blue hair accompanied by a large number of demons appeared from the disturbance.

"I can't wait to find out what humans taste like. This is my first chance to taste one," the boy—Atlantis the Ultimate Slime—said with a guileless smile.

In the Fourth Kingdom, Orange Gallery, Isabella was enjoying a cup of black tea while reading a book, when she abruptly raised her head and spoke. "How about you come inside instead of just staring at me?"

Cecilia and Isabella's male servants glanced around with confused expressions that betrayed they had no idea what she was talking about.

"Oh my, and here I thought I'd erased all traces of my presence." A man emerged from the shadow of a pillar without his steps making a sound. He was tall and slender, and handsome enough to turn heads.

His polite speech, coupled with his tailcoat and excellent posture, gave him the air of a first-rate butler. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Isabella Stuart. I am one of the New Seven Black Stars, Adek the God of Games."

He finished his introduction with an elegant bow.

"I believe my security is rather tight, is it not?" Isabella said.

"Indeed it is. My game with them was rather tedious." Adek shrugged his shoulders. "I'm expecting a more pleasant game with you, Queen."

These two kingdoms weren't the only ones under attack. Enemies had appeared near most of the Seven Heroes at roughly the same time. So far, humanity had only managed to secure one victory. If two or more of the upcoming battles ended in the heroes' defeat, the seal of the seal stones under the palaces would come undone, and a great disaster would befall humanity.

The war that would decide the fate of the entire human race had only just begun.

Side Story: Reminiscence of the Great Silver Fang Pirate Crew

“Damn, I thought we’d stay locked up for life.”

Betts and his lackeys had been thrown into jail after the incident in the Fifth Kingdom, though they’d been released only three days later. According to the rumors they’d heard, Captain Greg, the boss of Silver Fang, had bargained with King Kevin for their release. The captain apparently had something he wanted to discuss with them personally, so the three of them had boarded the Beast Flag, the mother ship of the Silver Fang pirates.

“But I never imagined the captain would personally negotiate our release. Guess he has high expectations for me, eh, boys?” Betts said with a smirk on his face. For a man who’d blundered at several key points, and even gotten a large ship and every member of its crew involved in his shenanigans, he was certainly upbeat.

“That’s right! You’re the greatest, Betts!”

“Strongest in the world!”

Just like their boss, Betts’s underlings were uniquely confident.

“Bwa ha ha ha! I might even get promoted,” Betts said. If they shared a fraction of their carefree attitude with everyone around the world, society would surely become a bright and peaceful place.

Before long, the three of them arrived at the captain’s cabin. Betts knocked on the door without a shred of grace. “Captain Greg! It’s me, Betts!”

“Come in,” called a mature man’s voice from inside.

“Scuse me!” Despite trying to use polite words, Betts slammed the door open and he and his underlings strutted into the room like a flock of noisy birds. They weren’t acting ill-mannered on purpose; in fact, this was their idea of *good* manners.

The room they entered was gaudily decorated with looted jewels, and even had a carpet laid out, making it resemble a den from a luxurious inn. Such extravagance poured from every corner that it was enough to fill any sailor who entered with dreams of eventually getting their own ship and making a cabin just like this one. At the back of the opulent room sat a man in a wooden chair, a pirate hat on his head and an eyepatch over one eye.

“You look like you got some rest, Betts,” said Captain Greg, the boss of the Silver Fang pirates. The captain was in his forties, a little

on the shorter side, with a face that showed traces of wrinkles but was still sharp enough to command the allegiance of a group of ruffians. Most observers would have seen that his brow was crumpled in discontent, while his lips were twitching upward. It didn't take a genius to realize he was pissed off, but it washed right over Betts.

"Heya! Thanks and all!" Betts said with a bright smile.

Snap!

It was as if the sound of something breaking came from deep inside Greg. He rose from his chair and marched over to Betts.

"You colossal moroooooooooooooooooon!!!" Greg walloped Betts with all his might.

"Blergh?!" Betts fell flat on his back with a yelp.

"Messing up and getting caught...I'll allow for it. Our job goes hand in hand with failure. *However*," Greg said while glaring down at Betts, "how many times have I told you not to mess with the Seven Heroes, especially Alan?! There are some people in this world you should never get involved with!"

Greg's voice was angry, but it was also tinged with fear. After a moment, he began telling them a story about long ago.

While Greg was the boss of a large pirate crew in the present, when he was young, he'd been a member of a mercenary group hired by the First Kingdom during the great war. He'd come from the slums, but he had an ambition: to make a name for himself in battle and get rich.

At the time, the world had been in the midst of the Titanomachy, so earning war accolades as a mercenary was the quick and easy way to strike it rich. Of course, the danger was immense, but the young Greg who burned with ambition had been willing to take the risk. He'd headed to the battlefield time after time, and while he didn't accomplish any major victories, he'd been successful enough to survive. His goal had still been far on the horizon, but his youthful recklessness made him think he'd be able to reach it.

One day, when Greg had been on his fifth battlefield, he'd met the real thing. It was another ordinary foot soldier, from the First Kingdom just like him: Alan Granger. Later, Alan would come to be known as the Champion of Light and hailed as a great hero, but he'd been a new recruit at the time. By sheer coincidence, Greg and Alan had been part of the same unit in the same military operation.

When the fight had started, Alan had fought like a war god running amok.

With a great howl, he'd purposely leapt into dangerous places and swung his sword like a lunatic in situations where one wrong step

would've spelled his death. He'd fought until he had been beaten bloody, but somehow made it out alive in the end. The only thing he'd left in his wake had been a mountain of enemy corpses. He'd repeated that suicidal behavior who knows how many times in a single battle.

At the time, Alan hadn't awakened his famous mana of light, and his skill with the sword had been a far cry from what it was in the present day, but his vehement determination, or perhaps fighting spirit—either way, *something* of his that simply couldn't be measured had overwhelmed everything that stood in his way.

Thanks to Alan's rampage, Greg had a much easier time fighting. Yet the vivid image of Alan ripping through the battlefield had struck fear into his heart, even though they'd been on the same side.

People like him really exist? Greg had wondered.

What really scared Greg had been what happened after that. He'd reunited with Alan in the next war zone. Despite Alan fighting until he was beaten within an inch of his life in the last fight, he'd taken part in the next one right away. He'd done the exact same things as before: he'd recklessly, viscerally, and fiercely cut down demon after demon, never losing his courage, resolve, or determination.

The next battle had been similar. And two battles after it. And—you guessed it—three battles after that too. Alan had appeared in every single battle Greg had gone to after that, defeating countless foes despite his body being exhausted.

He's a complete madman, Greg had thought from the depths of his soul.

One day, Greg had asked Alan a question while they were heading to the front. "Why do you fight to *that* extent?"

Alan's answer had been extraordinarily simple. "So that I can defeat the demon lord." His eyes had burned with passion, and he'd exuded zeal from every pore of his body.

Greg had been left shaking and speechless. *I get it now. I could never do it.* He could never heedlessly dive into skirmishes and perform beyond the limits of an ordinary person like Alan did.

That'd been when Greg had put the mercenary life behind him. Since there'd been a high risk of being attacked by the demon army when transporting goods by land at the time, transport by sea had become rather common. That'd given pirates plenty of targets to plunder, so he'd started a pirate group with that thought in mind. He'd understood it was a crime that undermined humanity's fight against the demon army, but average people like him who couldn't make a name for themselves through honest work could only survive by burdening others.

By the time Greg's Silver Fang had become a fairly large pirate group, the news of Hero Alan defeating Demon Lord Beelzebub and

putting an end to the war had started making the rounds. The people around Greg had been shocked, but he'd barely reacted.

Sounds about right.

Anyone who'd seen Alan with their own eyes thought the same. With his relentless tenacity, nothing was impossible. His was a world that scoundrels like Greg would never be a part of.

"That's why I've been talking my underlings' ears off since the first day I formed this pirate group! 'Don't mess with the Seven Heroes.' They're all monsters who achieved things on the battlefield thugs like us ran away from. And that goes double for Alan. If he decides to defeat you, you're already a goner. If he sets his mind to something, he *will* do it."

Greg's argument felt like it made sense, but at the same time some details were lacking. Regardless, it somehow carried great persuasiveness.

"Never forget this, Betts. You might sometimes feel like you've become the strongest in the world since you're a pirate, but the only reason we're doing this is because we lacked the strength to lead honest lives. People like them, who live in an honest world and get the best results in a respectable way, are the real winners. We're just a bunch of underhanded losers who live in their shadow." Greg lit his cigar and took a puff.

"Captain..." Betts, who was usually loud even while discussing secrets, spoke in a hushed voice. Both he and his underlings had been shocked to their cores. Even ruffians like them had their ambitions, and Greg—their captain, the owner of a huge ship, who lived a luxurious life—was the ideal they aimed for. So hearing him call himself, no, call *all* of them losers was astonishing.

"Anyway, we can't do much about grabbing Alan's attention. We'll suspend our pirate activities during the war," Greg said.

"Sorry 'bout that. This is our fault for getting caught." Betts lowered his head in apology, but Greg just shook his in return.

"Nah, that has nothing to do with it. They could crush us if they wanted to, but they'd rather focus on their fight with the demon army. The only reason they included your release in the terms of our agreement was because they wanted a way to officially keep us in check. I couldn't exactly turn them down and risk the ire of the heroes, y'know? It was an offer I couldn't refuse." Greg sighed. At that moment, he looked less like a buccaneer overlord and more like an ordinary man getting kicked around by changing times.

Greg finished his cigar and took another deep breath. "All right, first off, I guess we're gonna keep the minimum number of weapons

we need and sell the rest on the great kingdoms' black markets." He grinned. "Get your ass ready, Betts, things're about to get busy."

"Huh? Sell our weapons? Ain't that pretty risky?" Betts had a point. Criminal organizations like pirate groups needed a certain level of military power or the authorities would exterminate them. In order for them to survive, they needed to either bribe the authorities with a portion of their loot, or hold enough armed might to make the people in charge think wiping them out would cost them more than ignoring them. Silver Fang fell in the latter category, which meant their weapons were their lifeline.

"You're such a moron. I already told you, didn't I?" Greg said. "The great kingdoms don't have the time to worry about two-bit pirates like us right now. Luckily, we aren't important to them, so they'll leave us alone as long as we don't commit any crimes."

"Oh, I gotcha," Betts said.

"Since all the kingdoms're gathering up weapons like there's no tomorrow, they'll fetch a high price. Then we can buy the weapons back with our profits after the war's over. You're gonna have to change the way you think for some time, you guys. We'll temporarily forget our past pirate activities and become prim and proper merchants."

Betts was at a loss for words as he listened to Greg talk about their future course of action so objectively.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Betts?"

"Well, I just think it's amazing, Captain. If it were me, I think I'd cling to us being pirates to the end."

Greg might have been a criminal and the leader of a large group of pirates, but he was also a rich and successful man. The fact that he was prepared to throw away the methods that had won him his fortune and a dominant position as an outlaw was amazing to Betts, who could only dream of one day reaching that position himself.

"Ha ha ha! Man, you're completely clueless. I already told you." Greg acted as if this was a trivial matter. "We're underhanded losers, so we survive by playing it sneaky and smart." He then flashed Betts and his men a shameless grin.

The three of them couldn't say anything in return, but they could feel it. The reason their boss had become so successful was because he had committed fully to this way of life. It might not have been the strong, brave, and blinding life the heroes lived, but it was resilient in its own way. The young pirates thought the same about their boss.

Afterword

Hello, everyone, it's been a while. This is Kiraku Kishima. This marks the second volume of the *Veteran Heroes* series.

The battle against the New Seven Black Stars has finally begun; what did you think of it? I've also written an equally epic battle filled with muscle and punches in my other series, *Novice Middle-Aged Adventurer*, so I'm extremely satisfied, ha ha! A battle between two strong characters really gets your blood pumping, doesn't it? I'm going to write even more heated battles in the future, so look forward to them.

This might be too much of a personal matter, but I've gained weight recently. I guess when you get older, your metabolism slows down, so even if you eat as much as you used to, more of the food will end up turning into fat. When I talked about this with an older senior writer, he told me, "You're so naive, Kishima. The real hell is yet to come. Your metabolism will take a nosedive in the next five years," so I'm living while shaking in fear now. I'm going to try to eat as healthily as possible and try to at least keep my weight in the double digits.

But what exactly do you have to look for in food to lose weight? You see, I was actually in the rugby club during my high school years. My advisor told me to bulk up, so I ate until I was on the verge of throwing up. That means I know exactly how to gain weight, but I have no idea what to do if I want to lose weight. I guess vegetables have to be the answer, huh? I'll probably have to cut down on after-meal dessert too...

Anyway, those days sure were rough. My metabolism was fast since I was young, and I was running constantly for club activities, so my weight went down no matter how much I snacked. I ate an extra bowl of rice and six rice balls with every meal, and I *still* lost weight; I wanted to cry. I heard the girls in my class near me say stuff like, "Even when I exercise, I put on weight if I eat a little more!" and desperately wished for us to switch places. Despite all that, the moment I quit the club, I put on five kilos in the blink of an eye. I was miserable thinking what the point of my struggles had been. Now, I'm joining the side of the diet warriors. The flow of time can really change many things, huh?

Goodbye, and let's meet again next time.

Bonus Short Story

The Orthodoxy's Combat Clergy Corps Enlistment Welcome Party

The Second Kingdom's churches were split into three different grades based on their size and historical status: common, intermediate, and grand. There were only three grand churches in the entire kingdom. Their scale and status made them worlds apart from the rest of the kingdom's churches.

One day, a large crowd was gathered at the Grand Church of Lemingrad. Anyone could tell at a glance that those who had assembled weren't citizens there to pray. All of them were brawny people with sharp gazes. This was the day they would officially be enlisted into the Orthodoxy's Combat Clergy Corps, the Second Kingdom's de facto military.

The path they had to tread to achieve this goal had been an arduous one. General applicants and people with recommendations had all been brought together and given provisional status in the corps. For the next year, they had to endure rigid training and succeed in the strict selection process.

In the end, not even half of the provisional members had made it to official enlistment. Despite the hardships trainees like them had to endure, there was a never-ending stream of applicants, for one simple reason.

"We will now hold the Orthodoxy's Combat Clergy Corps enlistment welcome party!" The person in charge stood on a stage as he addressed the new recruits in a sharp, loud voice. They immediately stood at attention and quieted down—a result of their daily training. "If you would please take over, Commander General."

A woman climbed on the stage with loud, imposing footsteps. She was clad in a nun's habit and over two meters tall, but despite her massive build, a feminine charm miraculously coexisted with her muscles. The woman needed no introduction: she was Dora Alexandra.

The fresh recruits' expressions shifted, their faces filling with respect and admiration, as if they were looking at something majestic, even sacred.

That's right; the reason behind the endless influx of new Combat Clergy Corps applicants, despite the trials and tribulations they had to go through, was Dora herself. She was a hero who had once saved the

entire world, and the object of veneration for every citizen of the orthodoxy. There was no end to the number of people who wanted to work under her.

“We have some nice faces on this year’s recruits too,” Dora said cheerfully as she looked around at the recruits from atop the stage. “Your purpose from now on will be to safeguard God and this kingdom. Your future will hold hardships, and you may even succumb to temptation, but it’s for those times that you must never forget the feeling in your heart today. That pure and honest emotion you’re holding inside your chests.”

Dora’s deep voice carried across the room and reached straight into the hearts of the new recruits. She didn’t use any complicated language or elaborate declarations, yet her words deeply engraved themselves onto their spirits.

“Now, I think that’s enough for the formal speech.” Dora rolled up her sleeves and planted her elbow on a nearby desk. She had a wide grin on her face. “Let’s get the old custom started right away!”

“Yeaaaaaaaah!” The recruits who were quietly standing at attention a moment ago cheered in unison. The Orthodoxy’s Combat Clergy Corps enlistment welcome party had one standard event, and they were ready for it.

“306th group, number thirteen, Rimond Almark! It’s a pleasure to be working with you!” A muscular recruit stood in front of Dora and also rolled up his sleeves before placing his elbow on the desk.

“All right, Rimond, bring it on!” From the arm she had on the desk, Dora raised just the pinkie finger of her hand.

“Here I go!” Rimond firmly grasped her pinkie with his right hand. The aforementioned standard event was nothing less than an arm wrestling match between Dora’s pinkie and the new recruits. For soldiers like them, a match against the woman they looked up to was an exciting opportunity.

“Take thaaaaaaat!” Of course, he used his full strength. He didn’t hold back because he was up against the commander general, or because she was only using her pinkie.

“Hup.” However, Dora only needed to use a tiny bit of her strength to slam Rimond’s arm against the desk, turning over his enormous body at the same time and dropping him onto the floor.

Dora looked down at him and said, “Good. You’ve trained well. Keep up the hard work from here on out.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! Thank you very much!” Rimond sounded overjoyed despite his defeat.

“Number fifteen, Iris Herjel! It’s a pleasure to be working with you!” The next one to step in front of Dora was a woman with toned muscles.

“Very well. Come at me.” Dora raised her pinkie once more without showing any fatigue. She continued arm wrestling the new recruits with nothing but her pinkie for a long time.

According to a later interview in a certain news article, eighty-two percent of the Combat Clergy Corps said that this arm wrestling match was the most moving event they’d experienced in the time between their provisional and official enlistment.

Incidentally, up to this day, not a single soul has defeated Dora in this arm wrestling match.



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Back to the Battlefield: The Veteran Heroes Return to the Fray!
Volume 2
by Kiraku Kishima

Translated by Vasileios Mousikidis
Edited by Nikita Greene

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